



She's his Christmas wish.



CHRISTMAS *in Eden*



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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CHRISTMAS *in Eden*



This obsessed daddy belongs at the top of Santa's Naughty List.

I wasn't marrying for love. My foster brother's widow needed health insurance and looking after. I've got a Chicago penthouse I barely live in and more money than God. It was a business transaction, plain and simple—until I met my new fiancée's daughter.

Just like that, my once practical decision becomes a lot more complicated.

Eden is half my age and completely off-limits. I have no right watching her the way that I do, no justification for wondering how good she might taste. But I can't help it. I'm obsessed with my new stepdaughter. Her face, her curves, her perfume.

But most of all, I'm obsessed with the way she calls me Daddy.

This December, all I want is the chance to show Eden how priceless she is. But when a Grinch threatens to expose our relationship, it'll take a Christmas miracle to stop our holiday cheer from fizzling into silent nights.

Authors' Note: age-gap romance authors Margot Scott and Natalie Knight have joined forces to bring you a spicy-AF forbidden Christmas novella.

Potential triggers, aside from the taboo stepfather/daughter pairing, include grief of a deceased parent, some brief body

shaming and bullying by the antagonist character, as well as depictions of chronic illness.

Please read responsibly.

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Edited by Kathleen Payne

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CHAPTER 1



CHRISTIAN

MY DAUGHTER, BRITTANY, POPS HER GUM FOR THE hundredth time. “So, when are Paulina and Edith going to show?”

I swallow a sigh. “You know their names.”

“Fine, Petra and Eden.” She rolls her eyes without glancing up from her phone. “When are they going to get here? We’ve been waiting forever.”

“They’ll be here soon.”

She wedges her wireless earbuds into her ears and turns in her seat to face the small round window.

The scruff of my beard catches on my palm as I scrub a hand down my face. I know Brittany isn’t thrilled about spending Thanksgiving with my new fiancée and her daughter, but the least she could do is try to be civil. I’m taking her to the island of St. Thomas on my private jet, just like she wanted. This isn’t an attempt to create some happy blended family; I’ve only invited Petra and her daughter as a gesture of good faith. Once Petra and I have signed the requisite legal documents, we’ll have very little to do with each other. We’re not *betroted* for love or romance or any of the typical reasons. Rather, we’re getting married so Petra can stay in the country and receive top-notch medical care for her chronic illness.

Take care of my girls. That was my foster brother Dan’s last request before he passed away under mysterious circumstances.

Dan had gotten in over his head with a less than savory organization in Chicago's underbelly, and not for the first time. About sixteen years ago, Dan came to me looking for help paying off a loan shark. He'd run with criminals before, but since he had a new wife and a young daughter to take care of, I'd hoped he was finally going to turn over a new leaf. In the spirit of tough love, I told him no, I wasn't going to enable his bad habits. It was time he started thinking about how his lifestyle was affecting his family.

That was the last I'd heard from him. That is, until six months ago.

He came to me again, but this time he didn't ask for money. I watched my brother get down on his knees in my office and beg me to take care of his family if something ever happened to him.

"I know you don't owe me anything, Christian," he said, his voice cracking. "But my girls don't deserve to suffer for my mistakes."

He told me his wife, Petra, had been recently diagnosed with Primary Progressive Multiple Sclerosis, and he couldn't risk the possibility that she might be sent back to Poland in the event of his death.

"What the hell have you gotten yourself into?" I asked him. He wouldn't give me details.

"Just promise me, Christian," he said. "Promise me you'll make sure Petra stays in the US, and you'll look after my little girl."

As a father myself, it broke my heart listening to him gush about how smart and kind and *unlike him* his daughter was. He knew Eden had a real shot at being successful, and he didn't want the stink of his bad choices to stick to her after he was gone.

Stunned by my former foster brother's ominous request, I relented.

"I promise to look after them." Maybe I said it because I didn't really believe anything *would* happen, or maybe I felt

guilty that I didn't help him all those years ago.

He left my office without another word. Days passed, then weeks. I figured he must have been paranoid. But that opinion changed when I received a call from his widow.

"He's gone," Petra said, her voice thick from crying. "They took him from us. They took...everything."

She told me the truth, that Dan had been working as an informant for the police in their investigation of Dan's boss, a powerful drug lord. Upon learning of Dan's betrayal, he put a bullet between his eyes, then showed up at the family's home to inform them that they'd been evicted.

"We were lucky," she said. "Dan had kept me in the dark about most of it. That's why they didn't kill us."

Unfortunately, he'd also kept her in the dark about the precariousness of their situation. Technically their home wasn't their own. It had been a gift from his boss, part of his promotion within the criminal organization. Not only that, but their cars, antiques, even their bank accounts were stripped from them. All she and her daughter had were the clothes on their backs, a small bag of belongings they were graciously allowed to pack, and a letter from Dan explaining his agreement with me.

Petra assured me that she wasn't going to force anything upon me since it was nothing more than a gentleman's agreement. But I told her I was still going to honor it. In all honesty, part of me felt responsible for Dan's death. Perhaps if I'd helped him instead of turning him away all those years ago, he wouldn't have felt the need to devote himself to a criminal organization.

The guilt continues to eat away at me even now, as I check my watch. Petra and I have only spoken a handful of times since that first phone call, mostly to finalize certain details pertaining to our marriage of convenience. Firstly, I assured her that there would be no expectations of intimacy or fidelity between us. If she was to meet another man with whom she felt a strong romantic connection, I would gladly step aside to support their union. As for me, I gave up on finding love a

long time ago. Most of my entanglements have never made it beyond the honeymoon phase. Even my marriage to Rochelle, Brittany's mom, burned out after a couple of years.

Lastly, Petra and I agreed that she and Eden would reside in my penthouse apartment in Chicago after the wedding. I travel so often for work that it's like I barely live there, which means they'll pretty much have the place to themselves.

All in all, negotiations with Petra have gone smoother than I could have hoped. The hardest part thus far has been setting a wedding date. Each time we've tried to arrange a time to meet at the courthouse, her health would decline. She sounded so tired and run-down the last time we spoke, that I decided to invite her and her daughter on this vacation with Brittany and me.

Brittany wasn't exactly pleased when I told her my new fiancée and soon-to-be stepdaughter would be joining us. My daughter and I typically only get about two weeks a year together, one week in the spring and one in the fall. Most of the time, I'm busy working and she's with her mother and stepfather, so our twice-yearly vacations are the only father-daughter bonding time we get.

I love my daughter, but as an only child from not one but *two* wealthy families, she's never had to work very hard for what she wanted. In trying to grant her every opportunity, we've spoiled her. I'm hoping some exposure to "regular" folk will help bring her back down to Earth.

However, as I hear her scoff and exclaim, "Who're these plebs? They look like they just came straight from Target." I think perhaps that goal may be too lofty.

My flight attendant, Liz, ushers Petra into the private jet's cabin. I haven't seen Petra since the day she and Dan got married, and I'm saddened to see how her illness has affected her. She's thin bordering on skeletal, and her once golden hair lays limp and dull on her shoulders. However, her eyes still hold the same kindness I remember.

I cross the plane to help her up the last few steps.

“Christian,” she says in her lightly accented voice, slightly winded. “It’s been a long time.”

“It really has been.” I offer my hand to her. She takes it, her fingers cold and thin against mine.

“It’s good to see you again...despite the circumstances.” Her clear blue eyes become clouded as a distant look crosses her face.

Swallowing, I answer, “I should’ve come out to see you both sooner. I’m sorry, Petra. I can’t imagine how difficult it’s been for you and Eden.”

Petra gives a thin smile and waves her hand. “No, you were busy. I never could’ve asked you to drop everything just to check in on us. But we are thankful that you’re helping us now. Lord knows Eden could use a nice trip.” She turns to try to look back down the steps. “Speaking of Eden, sweetie, are you all right?”

A melodic voice replies, “Yeah, Mom. Just trying to get all of our stuff together.”

Petra starts to head down the stairs. “Here, let me help—”

“Allow me, Petra.” I put a hand on her shoulder. I saw how hard it was for her to walk up the stairs by herself. I can’t imagine her making the extra trip with luggage.

She gives a wry smile and nods. “Thank you, Christian.”

I descend the stairs and then stop in my tracks. A young woman stands at the foot of the steps, fiddling with two rolling suitcases. It seems that one of the handles refuses to collapse. She looks up at me, her honey-colored hair fanning around her face in the wind. Her wide, crystal-blue gaze sears into mine, as if she’s gauging my intentions. The slight flush from her struggles with the suitcase has colored the apples of her cheeks a pleasant shade of pink.

She’s beautiful. I have no reason to be gob smacked by this realization, but I am all the same.

“You must be Eden,” I say when I can find my voice again. I can’t help noticing the way the strap from her duffel bag

crosses her chest, emphasizing the striking curves of her body. “Need a hand?”

Her full lips tilt into a polite smile. “No, thank you, Mr. Montgomery. I’ve got it.”

“Please, no need to be so formal. Call me Christian.”

Although she declined my assistance, I still hold out my hand.

She raises an eyebrow, clearly skeptical of me, before finally handing over the finicky suitcase. “Okay, sure. Thanks...Christian.”

“Of course,” I say in a low voice.

I don’t bother trying to get the handle to go down as I head back up the stairs, listening for Eden’s footsteps behind me.

“Brittany,” I call out once I’m back on the plane. When she finally takes out her earbuds, I continue, “This is Petra and Eden.”

I gesture to both women, who offer polite smiles to Brittany as their gazes roam the cabin.

Brittany’s lip curls as she mutters, “Hey,” before plugging back into her phone. I sigh with irritation at her cold reception of Petra and Eden.

I sigh. “Please excuse my daughter. She’ll warm up to you, she’s just...tired.”

Fortunately, the other women appear to be too distracted by the luxury around them to notice my daughter’s rudeness.

“This is *your* plane?” Eden asks with wide-eyed amazement.

“It is, indeed. Please, take any seat you’d like,” I say, trying to ease the tension. “We’ll be taking off shortly.”

Petra’s balance wavers as she moves forward. Eden jumps to her aid without a word, wrapping an arm around her mother’s shoulders. Once they’re seated, Eden points out the window.

“Look, Mom,” she says. “See the geese? I bet they’re migrating south for the winter.”

When Petra turns to glance out the window, Eden snaps her mother’s seatbelt low and snug on her waist.

I’m more than a little impressed at Eden’s consideration for her mother’s dignity, how she steps in to help Petra without letting her feel like a burden.

“Why don’t you take a nap?” Eden says. “I’ll wake you when it’s time to take your pills.”

Petra’s eyes are already closed when she sighs the words, “All right, darling.”

I sit down across from them, pulling my own seatbelt into place.

Eden glances over and catches me watching the two of them. She tucks some of her wavy hair behind her ear. “My mom told me we were going to a beach resort somewhere in the Virgin Islands. Where exactly are we going, Mr. Montgomery?”

“I told you to just call me Christian.”

She smiles shyly. “Right, sorry. Christian.”

I quirk my lips into a half smile. “It’s no problem, Eden. And we’re going to St. Thomas. I’ve booked us a couple of rooms at the Ritz Carlton there.”

“The *Ritz Carlton*? That sounds really fancy.”

“It’s a very nice hotel.” I recall a time when I, too, was unfamiliar with luxury. Before I started my first company, I was a regular guy working a nine to five. Before that, I was a foster kid. I know what it’s like to walk into a room and know that the carpets are worth more than I made in a year.

Judging by the apprehension on her face, I suspect Eden is thinking something similar about this trip.

“Christian, it was very kind of you to invite us on your vacation. But you really didn’t have to—”

I raise my hand to stop her. “I promise, it’s all right. I think after the difficult time you both have had that you’re allowed to be pampered for a bit.”

She relaxes back into her seat with a furrowed brow. I have to stop myself from reaching out to smooth the worry from her gorgeous face.

The pilot pokes his head into the cabin to tell us we’re taking off. I notice Eden’s vice grip on the armrest.

“Is this your first time?” I ask.

Her gaze snaps back to mine.

“What?”

“Your first time flying,” I clarify.

“Is it that obvious?”

I chuckle softly. “Just a guess. Your mother tells me you graduated high school with honors last spring,” I say, changing the subject to distract her from the fact that we’re about to ascend thousands of feet into the air. “Where are you attending college?”

“I’m not,” she says. “I’m...taking a year off.”

“Of course. I’m sure your father’s loss has been hard on you.”

“That’s not the reason,” she says, a bit too firmly.

She closes her eyes as we speed down the runway. I just have to keep her talking a little while longer.

“Have you thought about where you might like to apply?”

“Um...a little.” She spares a glance at her mother, who continues to doze soundly as the jet lifts into the air. “Johns Hopkins has a really good pre-med program.”

“You want to go to medical school?” I ask, impressed. She nods. “That’s quite admirable.”

The pink returns to her cheeks.

“Not really. I just want to help people.”

People like your mother, I think to myself. I study the girl in front of me. She's been through a lot in such a short time. Her mother's illness, losing her father, having her home and everything in it taken from her as a result of her father's misdeeds. Yet, here she sits, the picture of self-sacrifice and generosity. I bet she deferred college to care for her mother.

"Devoting your life to helping people is a commendable endeavor. I'm sure your father would be proud."

She shrugs. This is the second time she's gotten that strained look on her face after I mentioned Dan.

Petra stirs. Eden turns to her mother.

"Do you need something, Mom?"

Petra smiles sleepily.

"Oh no, sweetie. I'm all right." She presses a kiss to Eden's forehead, then whispers something to her in Polish. Eden responds in turn.

Now that the jet is stable, the two women settle into their seats, with Eden's head resting on Petra's shoulder. It's such an intimate moment, that I almost look away. But I can't seem to tear my gaze from Eden's face. The sunlight dances through the window, reflecting in the blue of her eyes and shimmering across her cheek.

My chest grows tight, and a curious notion strikes me. Even penniless and stricken with grief, they understand what matters most in this world: their love for each other.

CHAPTER 2



EDEN

I TRY TO SLEEP AS MUCH AS I CAN ON THE FLIGHT DOWN TO St. Thomas. It's the only way I can forget the fact that I'm hurtling through the sky in a metal cylinder.

Christian hires a car—something sleek and fancy with an emblem that I don't recognize—to drive us from the airport to the resort. After unpacking and getting settled in our rooms, we meet Christian and Brittany in the dining room of one of the resort's Michelin-starred restaurants. I wasn't sure if Mom would be up for dinner after the long flight, but when I suggested we order room service instead of having dinner with Christian and Brittany, she insisted she was looking forward to sitting down to a nice meal.

Though Thanksgiving is only a few days away, the restaurant as well as the resort's common areas have been decorated with Christmas-themed décor. Seated at the immaculately set table, I try not to gawk at the prices as I scan the menu. Everything from the two-hundred-dollar plate of caviar to the fifty-dollar cocktails reminds me that I'm not in Kansas—or in my case, Peoria, Illinois—any more. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the chandeliers were made of solid gold.

I can't imagine I'll ever get used to this level of extravagance. While my family's financial situation did improve over the years, there were quite a few Christmases when I was younger when Santa “forgot” to visit our house. I'll never forget eating ketchup sandwiches for dinner.

“Is your room to your liking?” Christian asks, pulling me from my thoughts. I meet his gaze over the top of my menu.

God, he’s ridiculously handsome. Every time I glance his way, I have to remind myself that he’s more than twice my age and engaged to my mom.

“Yes,” I tell him. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“Eden and I haven’t been to the beach in ages,” my mom says. “I’ve missed the smell of the ocean.”

“My room’s smaller than the one I had last year,” Brittany grumbles, eyes still glued to her phone. She hasn’t said a word to me or my mom since I tried talking to her on the jet.

As an only child, I’ll admit, I was excited at the thought of having a sister. At the very least, I thought it would be nice to be on this trip with another girl around my age. I didn’t expect us to become best friends overnight. I guess it was too much to hope that she’d be...you know, *friendly*.

At least Christian seems nice. We talked in between my naps on the plane. About my interest in medicine and his real estate business. I won’t claim to understand much about his job, but I kept him talking long past my comprehension just so I could listen to his deep, masculine voice. His dark brown eyes seem to pierce through me whenever he looks my way, like he’s seeing into the deepest parts of my soul.

“I thought Petra and Eden could use the extra space,” he says.

For once, Brittany looks up from her phone, and she does not look happy.

“What the hell, Dad?”

“Language, Brittany.” Christian runs a hand down his trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. “With an attitude like that, you’re lucky you’re still in a suite.”

She glares at my mom and me. “Whatever.”

Our server arrives to take our orders, breaking the awkward silence. I avoid Brittany’s scowl through several

courses, focusing instead on the delicious food and interesting conversation with her dad.

When Brittany speaks again, it's to announce, "Thank God, Allison and Stephanie are finally here." As she tucks her phone into her purse, her lips curve into a wide grin that isn't altogether unpleasant—for a cartoon villain. "I'm gonna go meet up with them. Bye, Dad."

Before Christian can put his fork down, Brittany is scampering out of the restaurant. He lifts his hand like he's going to call after her and then lets it drop with a sigh.

"She usually meets up with her friends when we come here," he says. "I'll ask her to include you, Eden, so you'll have people your age to hang out with."

Part of me is undeniably touched that he doesn't want me to feel left out. But I know what happens when you tell a teenage girl to include another teenage girl in her plans. The last thing our situation needs is one more reason for my future stepsister to hate me.

"Oh, no. That's okay, really," I insist, trying to drive the point home.

He deflates a little but doesn't push the point. "All right. If you're certain."

I flash what I hope is a grateful smile. Unlike some parents who can only see the good in their kids, Christian seems aware of his daughter's bad attitude.

My mom yawns and lays her fork down.

"I think I'll go to bed early tonight," she says.

I slide my chair back as she moves to stand.

"Let me walk you—"

"No, no." She waves her hand. "I'll be fine. Finish your dinner, sweetie. I'll meet you back in the room."

"Are you sure?"

"I am. In fact, could you bring back some dessert for me? The panna cotta sounds delicious."

“Of course,” Christian says kindly. “Have a good night, Petra.”

I keep my eyes glued to her back until she disappears from view.

“She’ll be okay,” Christian says. “I’ve alerted the staff to her situation. They’ll keep an eye on her.”

“Thanks,” I reply, twisting the cloth napkin in my hands. My gaze darts back to his face, and I’m suddenly very aware of the fact that it’s just the two of us, alone, in a dimly lit restaurant with flowers and candles on the table. One couldn’t be blamed for noticing how date-like the moment feels.

But you’re not on a date, I remind myself.

Christian opens his mouth as if to say something else, but he’s interrupted by our server’s return.

“Have either of you had a chance to look over our dessert menu?” the man asks, as a woman appears, seemingly out of nowhere, to gather our dinner dishes onto a tray.

Before I can answer, Christian says, “We’ll take an order of panna cotta to go. And as for the table, she’ll have a slice of the Caribbean spice cake with whipped cream, and I’ll have the affogato.”

Christian just ordered for me. That’s a thing that happened.

Our server nods and walks away.

“You must think I’m being pushy,” Christian says with a knowing smirk. “But I promise, the spice cake is the best dessert on the menu. If you hate it, we can switch, or you can order something else.”

I smile and shake my head. “I trust you.”

Something dark and intense flashes in his gaze.

“Good,” he says.

My mouth goes dry. I take a long sip from my water glass and command my cheeks to stop burning.

“So,” I say casually, “How long have you and Brittany been coming here?”

“This will be our third visit. Before that, it was Naples, Ibiza, Monaco...”

“Wow. Before this trip, the farthest I’d traveled from home was Disney World with my parents. Brittany’s lucky to have you.”

He laughs grimly. “I doubt Brittany would agree. She seems to be at an age where I can do nothing right. Though, if I’m honest, that phase started a long time ago.”

If the frown he’s aiming at the tablecloth is any indication, I can tell his strained relationship with Brittany must weigh on him.

“I can’t imagine feeling that way,” I say quietly.

“Are you saying you didn’t resent your dad’s presence when you were seventeen?”

My feelings about my own father are...complicated. Before I learned the truth about his criminal ties, he was my favorite person in the world. But all of that changed a year and a half ago when a group of armed thugs stormed into our house and began trashing the place because my dad’s boss wanted to remind him of his spot in the food chain.

Since I was little, my dad had fed me the lie that when he drove off to work, he was heading to a boring corporate job. But that couldn’t have been further from the truth. He’d been lying to me my whole life. Everything my parents had given me—birthday presents, Christmas gifts, my laptop and phone, even the bed I slept in—had been bought with blood money.

Compared to my own father, Brittany’s dad seems like a saint.

“I’ll be more specific,” I say. “I can’t imagine feeling that way about *you*.”

His gaze meets mine, and I forget how to breathe.

Our server returns with a box and two plates. The russet-colored spice cake with whipped cream looks just as delicious

as Christian promised it would be. He carves out a small chunk of espresso-doused ice cream from his own dish and brings the spoon to his lips.

“*Bon appétit,*” he says.

The look of pleasure on his face as his lips close around the spoon has me feeling warm all over. I turn my attention to my own dessert, spearing a bite of spice cake. The warmth from the cinnamon and clove pairs wonderfully with the sweetness of the whipped cream.

“Oh my god,” I moan. “That is *so* freaking good.”

“I told you,” he says, wiping the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “Best thing on the menu.”

“I don’t know. Mom’s panna cotta sounded really good, too. Seems like the only way to know for sure is to come back and try something else tomorrow.”

He chuckles. “Do you want to try a bite of my affogato?”

“Sure, I love coffee.”

I expect him to slide his plate closer to me so I can reach it. My breath catches when he scoops a bit of ice cream and espresso onto his own spoon.

He reaches across the table.

“Go on,” he says, his voice deep and a little hoarse. “Try some.”

Hypnotized by his words and the heat in his gaze, I lean forward and wrap my lips around the spoon. The bitterness of the coffee is tempered by the cool vanilla ice cream. It’s delicious, but if I’m being honest, I hardly notice the taste.

All of my attention is focused on Christian.

His gaze darkens as an expression I’m not sure how to decipher crosses his face. Slowly, he slides the spoon out of my mouth. I let the creamy mixture coat my tongue for a few seconds before swallowing.

“Good?” The husky baritone rasp in his voice zips down my spine like electricity, and without realizing it, I squeeze my

thighs together under the table.

I lick my lips and nod, stunned by the fact that he's definitely still watching my mouth.

"You missed a spot."

He reaches over and gently rubs his thumb across my bottom lip. My heartbeat stutters. Instead of wiping the cream on his napkin, he brings his thumb to his own mouth.

Arousal burns low in my stomach, and I can't help the gasp that escapes me. Time seems to stretch on forever between us. The tension is unlike anything I've ever felt before.

"Can I get you anything else this evening?" our server asks, like a blade slicing through the moment.

Christian's eyes, still dark with longing, widen, as a look of almost-horror floods his face. He clears his throat.

"No," he says. "That will be all."

"Very well, sir. Shall I charge the bill to your room?"

Christian nods. His chair scrapes the floor as he rises from the table. He opens and closes his mouth a few times before finding his voice again.

"It's late," he says, his tone robotic. "I'll see you and your mother in the morning, Eden."

I'm still scrambling to find my own response long after he's left the restaurant.

"What the hell just happened?" I whisper. I sag into the chair, my face on fire and my mind reeling from the insanity of it all.

Did I just...*flirt* with my future stepdad?

My heart pounds at that realization. I've never really flirted with a boy before, much less a *man*, and I'm not sure how to feel about it. Christian and my mom aren't actually dating, but he's still technically her fiancé. I don't have to be a dating expert to know you're not supposed to flirt with your mom's fiancé.

Cheeks still aflame, I grab my mom's panna cotta and scurry out of the restaurant, leaving behind the espresso-drowned ice cream melting on the plate.

MOM IS ALREADY in bed when I get back to the room.

"I brought your panna cotta," I say, holding up the container like a trophy. Guilt coils in my stomach as I try to look and sound casual.

She gives a weak smile. "Thanks, sweetie. Can you put it in the fridge for now? I'll have it tomorrow."

I store the dessert in the fridge and then cross over to the closet to look for my swimsuit. On the way here, I passed one of the resort's half-dozen swimming pools. The thought of trying to fall asleep with my mom in the next bed after what happened with Christian makes me want to curl up and die. I'm hoping a night swim will help cool the embarrassment burning inside of me.

"Are you going out?" Mom asks, as I tease my swimsuit off the hanger.

"Yeah." I pad into the bathroom to change, leaving the door open a crack so I can still hear her. "I was thinking I'd check out the pool."

"Okay, just don't stay out too late. And don't forget your key card. I've already taken my meds, so I'll probably be asleep soon and won't be able to let you back into the room."

I fasten the halter tankini top behind neck.

"I won't forget it." I wrap a towel around myself in lieu of the swimsuit cover-up I don't want to bother hunting for, then grab my keycard.

"Hey, Mom?" I ask tentatively, pausing at the door.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"You don't...*like* Christian, do you?"

“I like him well enough.”

“Right, but...” I struggle to muster the words. “You don’t like him the same way you liked Dad, right?”

She lets out a puff of air that sounds like a laugh. “Of course not, Eden. Christian is a nice man, but you know we’re not getting married because we love each other.”

I did know that, but it was reassuring to hear it again.

Not that I should *need* to be reassured of that fact. It’s not like it makes a difference. He’s going to be my stepdad either way.

“This is how we survive, Eden. We just have to accept that.”

I swallow thickly. “Right, I know.”

She hums in response, and I take that as my cue to leave.

I shut the door and then lean against it, running my fingers through my hair with a sigh.

“This is how we survive,” I reiterate softly.

I just hope I can survive this vacation.

CHAPTER 3



EDEN

THE POOL IS DESERTED WHEN I ARRIVE, AND I ENJOY HAVING the water all to myself. As I back float from one end of the pool to the other, I can't stop my thoughts from looping back to Christian and how he fed me ice cream from his spoon. The memory burns inside me, a simmering between my hips that refuses to cool down.

I'm staring up at the night sky when I hear laughter from behind me. When I right myself in the water, I see it's Brittany and her two friends in their bikinis. They whisper among themselves as they glance over at me.

I raise my hand in a halfhearted wave. "Hey."

A look of annoyance flashes across Brittany's face, as one of the other girls—a blonde in a red bikini—waggles her fingers in my direction.

"You're Brittany's stepsister, right?" she asks. "Edith or something?"

I smooth my wet hair back from my face. I'm sure this girl already knows my name. She's just being a bitch about it for Brittany's sake.

"It's Eden," I say.

"Oh my god, that's such a pretty name!" The blonde leaves the others to sit beside the pool, closer to me. "I'm Allison."

"Nice to meet you."

“And I’m Stephanie.” The other girl—a redhead with freckles—sits beside Allison, letting her long, pale legs dangle in the water. “Brittany told us her dad invited you and your mom on *their* vacation.”

I shoot Brittany a glare. She’s back to staring at her phone with an air of aloofness.

“Christian is *such* a nice guy,” Allison says, her smirk as sharp as a knife. “He’s always helping the less fortunate. Last year he donated a bunch of money to a homeless shelter. Have you ever lived in one of those?”

My jaw clenches.

“No,” I reply, my voice flat with irritation. “I’ve never lived in a homeless shel—”

“That’s *such* a cute swimsuit.” Stephanie splashes me with her foot.

I glance down at my teal tankini. I’ve had it for a couple of years, so the color is kind of faded, but it’s still one of my cuter suits. Even so, I know better than to take a compliment from one of Brittany’s friends at face value.

“Thanks...”

“I could *never* wear a suit like that,” Allison says. “The bigger tops just look better on girls your size. I’d just get swallowed up in it.”

The snide comment would hurt more if I wasn’t used to people giving me crap about my weight. I’ve been what most people would consider “overweight” since I was a kid, and I’ve survived my share of bullying because of it. But in watching my mom struggle with her illness over the last year, I’ve come to accept my body at its current size. I’m strong and healthy and capable. I’ll never be thin, and that’s fine. I’m damn cute just as I am.

Honestly, I’m more annoyed than offended that I have to endure this interaction.

“Guys, I’m bored,” Brittany says, inspecting her fingernails. “Let’s go find the sauna.”

Allison puts on a pout. “Aww, but we were just getting to know your new stepsister—”

“She’s *not* my stepsister,” Brittany snaps. She scowls at me and then stalks off toward the resort entrance.

The other girls scramble to their feet.

“Brittany, wait!” Stephanie calls. “I thought you wanted to swim...”

They rush after her, leaving me blissfully alone. But even as relief washes over me, part of me knows the feeling won’t last. That selfish, petty, spoiled girl is going to be my stepsister.

I groan. *Why couldn’t Christian have been child free?*

Rather than risk another run-in with Brittany and her minions, I decide to call it a night. I climb out of the pool and towel off, then wrap my towel around my body and slip into my flip-flops. It’s not until I’m ready to go that I realize my keycard is missing.

And I don’t suspect it grew legs and wandered off on its own.

Clenching my jaw, I glance in the direction that Brittany stormed off in. She must have taken it while the other girls distracted me.

“Damn it.” I rub the spot between my brows. I’ll just have to hope my mom isn’t so dead to the world that she doesn’t hear me knocking.

I walk back to the room with my fingers crossed. Pressing my ear to the door, I knock.

No answer.

I knock again, louder this time.

“Mom, it’s me.”

I bang on the door with my fist, but there’s still no answer.

“Fuck...” I give up and sag against the door. It’s no use. The sleeping pills her doctor prescribed her are no joke. I

could pound on the door all night and Mom wouldn't hear it.

My next stop is the resort's front desk.

"I'm sorry, miss," the night receptionist says. "If you can't show me identification, I can't give you a keycard to the room."

"But my identification is *in* the room," I tell her. "Shouldn't my name be on the reservation?"

"Your name might be on the reservation, but I can't confirm that you are who you say you are."

I suppress the urge to scream. "Then what *can* you do?"

"If another member of your party can confirm your identity, I'll give you another keycard."

"Okay... Great. I'll do that."

I back away from the front desk, avoiding odd glances from the other guests as I pull my towel tighter around myself. The last thing I want to do is go crawling back to Brittany, which leaves me with only one other option.

It takes me a minute to gather the courage to walk to Christian's room and knock on his door.

"Please be awake," I whisper.

I hear a muffled male voice say, "Coming."

The door opens and all of the air *whooshes* out of my lungs.

Christian stands in the doorway wearing only a pair of gray sweatpants that rest low on his hips. My eyes drink in his toned chest, rippling abs, and the distinct vee shape above his pelvis. His dark chest hair is streaked with silver, like his beard and the hair on his head. He's in incredible shape, and not just for a man in his forties.

My jaw hangs.

"Eden?"

I force myself to meet his gaze.

For God's sake, girl, get it together.

“Is everything all right?” he asks, genuine concern creeping into his voice. “Is it your mother?”

My thoughts lag as I struggle to ignore the *god-like physique* before me. I finally get my tongue to work and squeak out, “I’m locked out of my room. Do you happen to have an extra keycard?”

He blinks as if he’s only just noticing that I’m standing at his door in my wet bathing suit and a towel.

“I, um... No, I don’t think so.” His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “But if you want to step inside for a minute, I can call the front desk and have them bring one up.”

I shouldn’t *want* to come into his room as badly as I do. He steps aside to let me in, and I slip past him, my arm brushing his abdomen as I go.

His room looks pretty similar to mine and Mom’s, except instead of two beds, there’s a large California king-sized bed in the middle of the room. He shuts the door and moves to the desk to use the hotel’s phone. While he speaks to the receptionist, I glance around the room, taking note of his personal items, like the workout clothes that seem to have escaped his suitcase, despite the fact we’ve been here for less than a day.

Christian ends the call and turns to me. “They’ll bring a new card up shortly.”

“Thank you.”

We stand there awkwardly for a few seconds, avoiding one another’s gaze, before Christian finally gestures to the bed.

“You can have a seat, if you’d like.”

I nod and take a seat on the edge of the big bed, sinking down into the memory foam.

He clears his throat. “I take it you went for a swim and forgot your key?”

I don’t want to come off like I’m tattling on my future stepsister, but I don’t want to lie to Christian either, so I settle for a half-truth. “I brought it with me to the pool, but it seemed

to have disappeared while I was there. Maybe someone thought it was theirs and took it by mistake.”

His gaze narrows, like he’s trying to read my facial features.

“Someone we know?”

I shrug. “Maybe...”

Sighing, he takes a seat on the bed beside me, close enough that our thighs are almost touching. I’d be lying if I said the proximity of our bodies and our lack of clothing didn’t make my head spin.

“It’s okay, Eden. You can tell me if Brittany took your keycard.”

“I don’t know that she took it for sure.”

“If you have a good enough reason to suspect her, that’s enough for me.” He shakes his head. “Please allow me to apologize on her behalf. I know she can be difficult.”

To call Brittany “difficult” is being diplomatic, but I understand that he’s her father.

“She and I haven’t been close in a long time,” he continues. “I should’ve been there for her more, but my work kept me occupied and now she’s busy with her own life. Her mom and I wanted to give her everything. I guess it shouldn’t surprise anyone that she’d grow up spoiled and entitled.” He gives a small self-deprecating laugh. “I’m as much to blame for her poor treatment of you as she is.”

“No, you’re not,” I tell him earnestly. “You’re a good person, I can tell. Trust me, I know a thing or two about crappy fathers.”

He tilts his head. “You and Dan weren’t close, either?”

I take a deep breath and brace myself to talk about my father.

“We were when I was little, but when I found out who he really was... Let’s just say it had a serious impact on our

relationship. I was angry with him for a long time. I'm still angry with him."

"Because he lied to you?"

My bottom lip trembles as conflicting emotions rise within me.

"That's part of it. I'm angry that his lies put me and Mom in harm's way. But mostly I'm angry at him for dying. He should be here, but he's not. He's gone, and I can't ever get the closure I need to forgive him."

I don't realize I'm crying until Christian cups my cheek. His thumb wipes a tear from my face. I turn away from him, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry. I don't usually cry so easily."

"You're allowed to feel sad, Eden." Gently, he takes hold of my chin and slowly turns my face back toward him. The sincere concern and care in his gaze hits like a fist and makes me cry even harder.

I lean into his touch. "I miss him so much. And I hate that I miss him so much."

Christian wraps a strong, protective arm around my shoulders and pulls me close. I melt against him, letting his body support me. I don't realize just how close we've become until I feel his nose brush against mine.

"I know, baby," he says softly, his minty breath warm on my face.

My chest swells with a longing I don't fully understand.

"Please, Christian..." I have no idea what I'm begging him for. I just know that he's the only one who can give it to me.

My words seem to flip a switch inside him. He surges forward, cupping my face in his warm hands, and presses his lips to mine. I'm so shocked by the kiss that I immediately stop crying, letting all my sadness and frustration be washed away by lust.

I know this is wrong. I shouldn't be kissing him, but I'd rather die than ask him to stop.

Christian slides his tongue into my mouth, tasting me thoroughly. His lips move against mine so intensely that I can barely keep up. I stop trying to meet his intensity and instead let him have his way. He accepts my surrender, biting my lips gently.

He cradles the back of my head and asks, "Is this what you wanted, baby girl?"

My lower body tightens deliciously.

"Yes," I whisper against his lips. "*God, yes...*"

A wicked smile graces his face as he lowers me onto the bed. I gasp as he kisses my neck, sending a rush of warm tingles down my spine.

My breath hitches when I feel him untuck and open my towel.

His fingertips brush over my breasts, teasing me until I feel my nipples harden against the fabric of my swimsuit. I press my lips together to stem the embarrassing noises bubbling up from my chest, as Christian's fingers dance down to my stomach. He traces the outside of my swimsuit bottoms, and after a few seconds, I realize he's intentionally avoiding my slit.

And it's driving me *crazy*.

"Christian, please, I..." I can't even get a full sentence out. My body is so warm and tingly all over. I can't think straight.

After lightly biting the junction of my neck and shoulder, Christian draws back to look at me.

"*God*, you're perfect, Eden," he rasps. "Your body is so reactive, so beautiful. Do you even know how gorgeous you look right now, trembling underneath me?"

His words ignite a fire inside me. I whine softly.

"Please..."

“Tell me what you want, baby girl. I’ll do anything, you just have to tell me.”

I gasp as he pulls my swimsuit bottoms to the side. That’s when I realize he’s torturing me on purpose. He *knows* what I want, and he *knows* I can barely speak. But he wants to hear me say the words.

“I...I...”

He presses a featherlight kiss below my ear.

“Come on, baby,” he coaxes, making me shiver. “Tell me what you want.”

“I want—*oh!*” I gasp as his fingers ghost over my pussy. My brain short-circuits, and without meaning to, I blurt out, “I want you to touch me, Daddy.”

Christian goes completely still.

“What did you just say?” he asks.

Humiliation floods my face, hot and mortifying.

“I didn’t mean—”

A knock at the door makes both of us jump.

Christian tears himself off me and rushes to the door. I sit on the edge of the bed, still as a statue, as he answers the door and says a few words to the person in the hall.

Where the hell did that word come from?

My blood pounds in my ears, so loud and furious that I don’t realize Christian’s saying my name right away.

“Eden,” he says, his voice raspy and baritone. “You should go, before I do something that’ll make your dad haunt me forever.”

I swallow. My gaze roves over his taut posture, from his dark eyes and clenched jaw all the way to his white-knuckle grip on the open door. I’m not sure where the impulse comes from, but somehow I force myself not to get up and run.

Because in all honesty, I don’t want to leave.

I shake my head, then reach behind my neck to unfasten my swimsuit top. The straps fall.

Christian's gaze drops to my bare breasts. His lips drift apart.

"I want to stay," I tell him.

He stands in the doorway for another long moment, letting his eyes drink in every inch of my body before he shuts the door with a resounding *thud*.

CHAPTER 4



CHRISTIAN

I MOVE TOWARD EDEN LIKE A MAN POSSESSED.

She gazes up at me as I tower over her, pulling her kiss-bruised bottom lip between her teeth. I watch her breasts rise and fall with each heavy breath and my cock aches. She looks like sin. *My sin.*

I reach out to tuck some stray curls behind her ear. Her hair is a little sticky with chlorine from her time in the pool, but still soft, nonetheless.

“Are you sure?” I ask. “There’s no turning back after this.”

Eden nods.

“Please, Christian.”

A groan lodges in my throat at the desperation in her voice. I press her back onto the bed and drape myself over her. My cock drags against her thigh and that slight amount of pressure has me rolling my hips.

She gasps as I plant open-mouthed kisses up the column of her neck. I squeeze and cup her breast, grazing her pebbled nipple with my palm. Eden trembles against me. Her legs fall open, allowing me to wedge between them, and the instant my hard cock pushes against the crotch of her swimsuit, she moans.

“C-Christian...”

I suck hard at the spot where her shoulder meets her neck.

“That’s not what you called me before, baby,” I rasp, brushing my thumb across her nipple. “Say it again.”

Her cheeks and ears take on a bright pink glow.

“But that was... I didn’t mean to... It was—”

Her words dissolve into whimpers as I grind my hips into hers.

“Come on, baby girl.” I kiss the shell of her ear. “I want to hear you say the word.”

She clutches at my bare shoulders.

“Daddy,” she whines, breathless and sexy.

“Good girl.” I reward her with a soft kiss that turns ferocious, and she surrenders to my savagery, letting me swallow her whole while taking a few bites for herself in the process. Who knew this sweet, smart, kind young woman could be so *insatiable*. Her enthusiasm makes my dick throb. I thrust harder, faster.

She breaks off the kiss with a gasp. “Oh God, Daddy, that feels...”

“Go on, angel. Tell me how it feels.”

“It feels so good. Like I’m running toward something. ... But I can’t...”

I run my hand along her thigh, barely touching her soft skin.

“Like you’re racing toward something you can’t quite reach?”

She nods, her cheeks burning an even deeper shade of scarlet. It takes every drop of strength within me to pull back, but somehow, I manage to do it. She whines at the loss of friction, her hips bucking like she’s trying to follow me.

I place my hand on her hip to anchor her to the bed. “Dry humping your swimsuit isn’t gonna get you there, baby. Daddy needs to touch you.”

Holding her gaze, I slide her bottoms off in one quick motion. The instant her bare pussy comes into view, I feel the air get punched out of my lungs. I already knew her body was gorgeous, but her puffy, close-trimmed pussy is the *pièce de résistance*. Her slit glistens with the evidence of her need for me.

Gently, because I'm touching something precious, I caress her pussy lips, letting her warm arousal coat my fingertips. Eden whimpers, her thighs trembling.

“*Holy fuck*, just look at you. So sweet and juicy. You really are ready to burst, aren't you?”

“Yes, Daddy. I'm so close.”

“I know, baby, I know. And don't worry. Daddy's gonna take you all the way there.”

Without wasting another second, I lean forward and drag my tongue over her soaked folds. Eden moans. Her hands fist around my hair. She doesn't push my head away or try to pull me closer. She just clings to me like she needs to hold on to something to stay grounded.

“Daddy, that's so good.” Her voice sounds absolutely *wrecked* and I love the sound of it. “I can't believe how good it feels.”

I draw back only far enough to answer her. “Hasn't anyone tasted your pretty pussy before?”

Eden pants a few times before she shakes her head

“N-no. I haven't done anything like this before.”

Flames lick in my lower abdomen.

“You're a virgin?”

She looks like she wants to pull the pillow over her face.

“Yes,” she squeaks.

I'm instantly harder than I was before. Eden—*my Eden*. My beautiful, intelligent, curvy Eden—hasn't been touched like this by anyone else.

“Good.”

“Really?” She squints like she doesn’t believe me.

“Fuck yes. I can’t think of a greater honor than being the first man to touch and taste you.” I pause to smirk. “Well, maybe one thing...”

“What, Daddy?”

I brush two fingers along the sides of her clit.

“Being the first man to make you come.”

Without another word, I dive back into her pussy, lapping at her stiff little bud with renewed vigor. Now that I know this is her first sexual experience, I want to do everything I can to make it perfect. It’s what she deserves. She’s carried the weight of her father’s passing and her mother’s illness on her shoulders. She deserves a chance to feel good and forget about her responsibilities, if only for a while.

I savor her cries of pleasure as I lick her clit, my laps growing quicker and harder as I go. When I wrap my lips around her clit and *suck*, her cries turn to moans. I don’t stop as her thigh muscles clench around my head and her whole body shudders.

The sounds that pour from her lips make my cock throb. A sense of pride fills my chest at having guided her to her peak, though a part of me thinks it a shame that I wasn’t inside her when it happened.

But what if she’s not ready for that? I push the thought from my mind. The last thing I want to do is make her feel pressured. Letting someone go down on her is monumental enough. If she wants to take things further, it has to be her idea.

I let up on her pussy so she can catch her breath while she finishes riding the waves of her orgasm. We’re both still breathless when I ease back up to rest beside her and kiss her on the lips.

“That was beautiful to watch, baby girl.”

She sighs dreamily. “Thank you, Daddy. It was amazing to feel.”

I run my hand up and down her body, mapping her luscious curves. She shifts onto her side, snuggling closer to me, and in the process of moving, her thigh brushes my still hard cock. I bite back a groan, but not fast enough.

She freezes, glancing up at me with a curious expression.

“You’re still hard,” she whispers, like she’s afraid someone will hear us.

I try to angle my dick away from her.

“Sorry. Just ignore it.”

But she can’t seem to tear her gaze from the tent in my sweatpants. Her tongue slips out to wet her lips. “Do you want help, Daddy?”

God, there’s nothing more that I want than to feel Eden’s mouth on me. Still, I shake my head. “I’ll be all right, Eden. You don’t have to touch me just because I touched you.”

A daring look flashes across her face.

“But...what if I want to?”

Arousal courses through my veins. Her hand inches down before I can even respond. My cock twitches at the light press of her fingers as she pets me. I can’t take the millimeter of fabric between us.

“*Fuck, baby*,” I groan. “Go on, take out Daddy’s cock and play with it.”

She pulls down the front of my sweatpants and my cock springs free from its cloth prison. At the first light touch of her fingertips to the head of my dick, I throw my head back and groan.

She lets out a shaky breath and wraps her hand around my shaft.

“Daddy, you’re so big, I can barely fit my hand around you.”

“That’s okay, baby girl. Just do your best.”

It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to squeeze her hand as she gently strokes me up and down. I’ve never been the type to get off on a woman’s inexperience, but for whatever reason, Eden’s curiosity makes my dick throb. Her fascination with my body makes my balls ache and my skin heat up. I can practically feel the heat of her gaze as it moves over me. As much as it kills me to stay still, I wouldn’t trade this moment of innocent exploration for anything—

“Can I put it in my mouth?”

Okay, maybe one thing.

I growl through clenched teeth. “You shouldn’t tease Daddy like that, Eden.”

“I’m not teasing. I want to make you feel good, too.”

I search her face for any sign of hesitation and come up empty. She wants this as badly as I do. And fuck it if I can’t find it in me to refuse her.

Nodding, I brush my knuckles against her cheek. She keeps one hand on my cock as she slides down the bed. My pulse jackknives as I watch her face inch closer and closer to the pulsing length in her fist.

She bites her bottom lip. “Um... I’m not sure how to do it. Can you teach me?”

A groan pours from my chest.

“You’re going to be the death of me, aren’t you, baby?” I cradle the back of her head. Slowly and carefully, I guide her lips toward my cock. “Open your mouth, sweetheart.”

My good little girl does as she’s told. The sight of my cockhead breaching her lips is breathtaking. I have to snap myself out of my stupor to tell her what to do next.

“Good girl. Now wrap your lips around me.”

The heat of her mouth is heaven. I resist the urge to close my eyes, not wanting to miss a single second of the view

before me. She swirls her tongue experimentally around the tip.

“Fuck...Eden.” I swallow hard. Eden’s gaze silently asks what she should do next.

“That’s good, baby. Really good. Now relax your jaw. Careful of your teeth. Let your tongue slide against... Yeah just like that, sweet girl. You’re doing such a good job... making Daddy feel so good.”

The head of my cock hits the back of her throat. She tries to take me deeper and gags. I grasp her hair gently and ease her off my dick.

“No, baby, don’t push yourself.”

She whines softly in frustration. “But I can barely take half of it.”

“Here, give me your hand.” I wrap her fist around my shaft. “Use your hand to stroke whatever doesn’t fit in your mouth.”

Following my lead, she strokes her hand up and down my cock as she bobs her head. The wet heat of her mouth and the smooth drags of her hand bring me closer and closer to the edge.

“Oh, *fuck*, Eden, baby, that’s perfect.” It’s a battle of wills not to buck my hips, but I don’t want to accidentally give her more than she can handle on her first try.

After a few experimental flicks of her tongue, I feel ready to burst. My balls tighten. I try to guide her off my cock.

“Baby, I’m going to come.”

She hums around my cock, and my words choke off as the vibrations hit me. She must sense my reaction, because she hums again, longer and with intention. My eyes roll back, and I’m treated to the most delicious type of torture.

“Eden,” I grit through clenched teeth. “If you don’t stop, Daddy’s gonna come in your mouth.”

I groan as she squeezes my shaft and sucks harder. Jesus, she actually wants to taste my seed.

My hand fists in her hair as I feel my hot release surging into my dick.

“You want it? Then fucking *take it*,” I growl as pleasure rockets through me.

I see the naked surprise on Eden’s face as I shoot my load into the back of her throat. She tries her best to swallow it all, but after a few seconds, she pops off with a cough, breathing heavily.

“You okay, baby?” I rasp.

She clears her throat and nods. “I’m good, Daddy.”

“That you are, sweetheart.” Smiling, I swipe a drop of my seed from the corner of her mouth with my thumb.

My mind is still reeling from my orgasm when Eden crawls back up to lay beside me. She trails her hand up my abs just as I reach out to cup her face, pulling her in for a kiss. She tastes like me; my chest swells with an emotion I’m too afraid to name as I realize how happy this makes me.

“Did I do it right?” she asks, her voice barely audible above the hum of the air conditioner.

“Yeah,” I say with an airy laugh. “You were perfect.”

Her eyes narrow into crescents as she smiles. The warm light from the hotel lamp brings out the golden undertones in her hair. I run my fingers through the strands, aware of her watching me catch my breath.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” I tell her. “I can’t believe you’re real.”

“Funny,” she says. “I was just thinking the same thing about you.”

Kissing her tenderly, I draw her tight to my chest. She melts against me, snuggling close, as I drape an arm over her side. We stay like that for a while, safely tucked away in our own little bubble, far from the outside world and its

consequences—and make no mistake, I tell myself, there *will* be consequences.

But fuck if I can muster the will to care.

Lying here with Eden, feeling the light puffs of her breath against my collarbone, I can't think of anything more pressing or important than making sure this isn't a one-off thing. Taking her to bed would be reason enough to reconsider the role I want to play in her life. Letting her call me Daddy, calling her my baby girl... It changes everything.

I'm invested in her now. In her happiness, as well as her pleasure. I want to take care of her, not because I promised her dad that I'd look out for her, but because it's *what I want* to do.

"I have to go back to my room soon," Eden whispers, gently scraping her nails through my chest hair.

I sigh the words, "I know."

No matter how badly I want her to stay with me, we both know she has to go back to her room before her mother wakes up, so she can help Petra get dressed and walk her over to the café where we'll sit down to a *family* breakfast with my daughter and my *fiancée*.

It's incredible how complicated things can get within a matter of hours.

"What happens now?" she asks.

My throat closes.

"I'm not sure," I say, because it's the truth. "For now, I think it's best if we keep this to ourselves, at least when we're around other people."

Her gaze shutters. I'm sure that's not the answer she wanted. It's not the answer I want to give her. But she seems to understand that it's our best option for now.

"I suppose you're right." Eden swivels to the edge of the bed, turning her back to me. Before she can stand, I reach out and grasp her shoulder.

“Tell me not to marry Petra,” I say, slightly embarrassed by the tremble in my voice. “If you tell me not to marry your mother, I won’t do it.”

Still not turning around, she rests her hand over mine on her shoulder.

“I need some time to think.” She rises, readjusts her swimsuit top, then pulls on the bottoms, grabs her towel, and leaves without another word.

Dread sinks into the pit of my stomach like a stone. I stare blankly at the ceiling, noting how much colder the bed feels without her in it. Normally I appreciate the extra legroom, but right now all I can think about is how much I miss having Eden in my arms.

I rub my dry, tired eyes, as if it were possible to scrub away the feeling. But who am I kidding? One taste of Eden’s lips, and I became a junkie who would risk everything for one more fix.

No, not a junkie. A *daddy* with a mission: take care of my baby girl.

And that’s exactly what I plan to do.

CHAPTER 5



EDEN

MY HEAD IS STILL SPINNING THE NEXT MORNING WITH memories from last night.

The delicious pressure of Christian's cock between my legs, and the delicate flutter of his tongue. How wide my lips stretched around him as I took him into my mouth. It was sexy and amazing and utterly insane.

And I loved every second of it.

I nestle deeper into my blankets at the memory of Christian's chest against my back. No one else has ever made me feel so beautiful and so *sexy*. He made me feel desirable, like I didn't have to apologize for my body not fitting into society's constricting ideal of how the perfect woman should fit between a man's hands. He thinks I'm perfect just the way I am, despite my inexperience.

Then again, if the hot, salty explosion in my mouth is anything to go by, he enjoyed teaching me how to please him.

I was embarrassed to admit it at first, but I loved calling Christian Daddy, almost as much as I loved hearing him call me his baby girl. My chest clenches like a fist around my heart. I can't wait to see him again—

My train of thought comes to a screeching halt at the sound of my mother's blankets rustling on the other bed. Guilt curls like smoke in my stomach.

What would she say if she knew that Christian and I had been together? Would she hate him? Would she hate *me*? I

know my mom doesn't care about Christian dating other women, but I'm not some random socialite. I'm her daughter, and someday soon, Christian is going to be my stepfather.

Unless they don't get married.

Christian's words come rushing back to me.

"Tell me not to marry your mother," he said.

But do I even have a right to ask him for that? My dad went to Christian because he knew he could trust him to take care of us, and Christian and my mom have already worked out their arrangement. If she knew what happened between us, she might refuse his help altogether. What happened last night could put our entire future at risk.

I need to talk to Christian as soon as possible.

Quietly, I rise from my bed and slip into the bathroom. After the world's quickest shower, I get dressed and slip out of the room with a final glance at my mom's sleeping form. No matter what happens, I need to know that my mom will be taken care of.

I make my way to Christian's hotel room, but when I knock on the door there's no answer. Figuring he must've already left for breakfast, I head down to the resort's seaside café to look for him.

When I arrive, the only familiar faces I see belong to Brittany and her two annoying friends. I consider finding another place to sit, at least until Christian arrives, but regardless of whether my mom marries him, Brittany is Christian's daughter. She's part of his life, and if I want to be part of his life, too, I'm going to have to find a way to tolerate her without letting her walk all over me.

Their conversation dies down as I approach their table. Stephanie and Allison whisper conspiratorially among themselves. I ignore them, meeting Brittany's gaze as I claim the empty seat beside her.

"I know you took my keycard last night," I say.

She stabs a chunk of melon with her fork. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I sigh. “Look, I know you’re not happy to be sharing your dad with me and my mom this Thanksgiving, but you and I are probably going to be spending holidays together from now on —”

“Sharing?” she scoffs, dropping her fork onto the white tablecloth. “I’m not sharing anything! You’re the one who inserted herself into my family vacation. You and your cripple mother have been *demanding* attention and money from my dad.”

“We haven’t demanded anything,” I say, my tone sharp with irritation. “And my mom isn’t a ‘cripple,’ she has a chronic illness. You shouldn’t use that word to describe anyone. It’s hurtful.”

“Ooh, I think her feelings are hurt.” Stephanie giggles.

Brittany smirks. “Good. She should feel bad for trying to steal what’s mine.”

“I’m not trying to steal anything,” I tell her.

“You already stole my hotel room! And don’t think I haven’t noticed you sucking up to my dad. Just because your own dad was a sketchy low-life criminal doesn’t mean you can just swap him out for mine.”

My throat closes. *How the hell does she know that about my dad?*

“We Googled your family last night,” Allison says, answering my unspoken question. “Sounds like your dad got what he deserved.”

My hands curl into fists. Something snaps inside of me, redirecting the anger I’ve been carrying for my father toward the pampered bitches in front of me. I shove my chair back so quickly it topples to the ground, no doubt drawing everyone’s attention to the drama playing out at our table.

Stephanie and Allison gasp.

“Oh my god—”

“She’s gone crazy!”

“Shut up,” I snap. “You two assholes know exactly what you’re doing. And you—” I aim the full force of my anger at Brittany’s smug expression. “—don’t deserve half of what your privileged upbringing has given you. From the moment we met, all you’ve done is bitch and whine and insult me and my mother. You’re *miserable*, and you make everyone around you miserable, too.”

Brittany’s mouth drops open in shock. She looks like she’s about to launch a retort, but I cut her off.

“I grew up with nothing. No, *less than nothing*. But my parents made damn sure I knew how much they loved me every single day. And my dad may have been a criminal, but at least he wanted to spend time with me. It’s no wonder Christian only tries to see you on holidays. I bet you barely pay attention to him even when it’s just the two of you.”

She blusters, “That’s not true—”

“Isn’t it? The only reason you care about me ‘stealing’ him is because you’re afraid he’s going to stop spoiling your pampered ass. You don’t care about him as a person. He’s just an ATM to you. But trust me, you’ll regret not appreciating him when he’s gone.”

My own statement hits like a bullet to the heart. I’ve been so bitter toward my father since I learned about his ties to the criminal underworld a year and a half ago. I let that bitterness grow and fester, tarnishing his memory. Now he’s dead.

He’s just...*gone*.

Brittany blinks, seemingly at a loss for words, as she slides her mask of smugness back into place. “Are you done?”

I bite my bottom lip to stop it from trembling. *I refuse to cry in front of these assholes.*

“Yeah. I’m done.” I turn to go, then gasp as I almost collide with a broad, hard chest.

Christian gazes down at me, his expression unreadable. I have no idea how long he’s been standing there, in his track

pants and tee shirt, listening to me go off on his daughter. My chest tightens. I brace myself for the reprimand. Brittany's a nightmare, but she's not my sister. He probably thinks I overstepped.

Instead of chastising me, he moves to stand at my side.

"Brittany, you've been nothing but rude this entire trip," he says. "If you don't turn your attitude around, this'll be the last trip I take you on."

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish's gob. "Are you kidding me? Did you not hear what she just said to me?"

"I heard every word."

Christian's gaze slants in my direction as he turns on his heel and heads out of the cafe. Something about the firm line of his mouth leaves an uneasy feeling in my stomach. All at once, I recall the whole reason I came down here, to talk to him about last night, and follow him outside.

I catch up to him on the walkway leading back to the guest suites.

"Christian, wait." I grasp his arm, and he spins around to face me with a stormy expression.

"What did you mean back there?" he says. "That you grew up with 'less than nothing?'"

I strain to remember everything I said to Brittany in the heat of the moment.

"I guess I meant that we didn't have any money when I was little. We moved around a lot, usually to different one-bedroom apartments. For a while, I only had enough clothes and toys to fill a suitcase. But things got better when I was around six or seven. I think that's when Dad started working for...those people."

Christian sighs heavily. My pulse races as I try to read his expression. Is he disgusted by the fact that I grew up poor? Or does he think I'm fishing for sympathy?

"But I actually came down this morning to talk to you," I say, quickly. "Last night was—"

“A mistake.” Christian’s voice is cold and hard.

My heart skips a beat, and I pray I’ve misheard him.

“W-what? Why?”

“Last night was a mistake. It never should’ve happened.”

I swallow hard, trying to dislodge the lump from my throat.

“You don’t mean that, Christian.”

“I do,” he says, final and serious. “I think it’s best if we both forget about what happened.”

I blink up at him, incredulous. How can he say that after what we did last night? After what he let me call him...

My voice trembles as I tell him, “If that’s what you think is best...”

He doesn’t answer me. Dejected, I wrap my arms around myself and rush past him, back toward my room.

My tears flow freely. What did I expect? Christian isn’t my real family. He’s just a man my father used to know. But my father is gone forever.

And so is my daddy.

CHAPTER 6



EDEN

I SPEND THE DAYS LEADING UP TO THANKSGIVING TRYING TO avoid the Montgomerys. Thankfully, Brittany seems content to ignore me, and I try not to encounter Christian more than I absolutely have to.

He's barely spoken to me since the other day, except to make small talk in front of my mother. My cheeks hurt from forcing my face to smile. I pretend like I'm not hurting, that I don't care about his rejection, that I don't lie awake at night thinking about his hands on my hips and his mouth between my thighs.

But I do care, and I am hurt. I'm filled with such immense pain and anger that I have to make an active effort not to shout in his face. I don't understand how he can call me his baby girl one minute and then want nothing to do with me the next.

Then again, I probably should have seen it coming.

I know Christian turned his back on my dad all those years ago. Why did I think he'd be any different with me? What makes me so damn special?

Ask Christian, I remind myself. He's the one who made me *feel* special. But it was just a game to him, or a colossal mistake, or whatever he's telling himself. The point is, I let him fool me into thinking he'd be there for me when I needed him, like a real daddy would.

But Christian's not my daddy. He's not even my real uncle. He's just the rich man my father guilted into helping us.

I want to tell him not to marry my mother for selfish reasons. Because being around him, knowing he doesn't want me, is agony. Then I feel ashamed when I see Mom limping to the bathroom or stretching out the stiffness in her hands. It's not fair to her for me to demand they break off their engagement. She needs access to the best medical care money can buy, and Christian can give her that.

So, I swallow it down, everything I want to scream, beg, and cry about. Down into my stomach where it sits in a locked box with no chance of ever coming up to the surface. I plaster on a smile and try to make the best of this trip with my mom. We hang out by the pool, order elaborate virgin drinks, and walk as far as we can on the beach before Mom gets winded.

As far as vacations go, it's nice. I chant the word like a prayer in my mind. The beach is *nice*. This pool is *nice*. The affogato I order for dessert every night is *very nice*, though it would be even better served to me on someone else's spoon.

I feign an air of aloofness as I take my seat at the table for the resort's all-you-can-eat Thanksgiving dinner. Despite the fact we've been eating our meals separately these past few days, both Christian and my mom insisted we all eat together tonight.

Christian clears his throat. "Now that we're all together, I'd like to thank Petra and Eden once again for joining us on this trip."

"Thank you for having us," my mom says, her gaze distant. She turns to me expectantly. "Right, sweetheart?"

"Right," I say. "Thank you. It's been...*nice*."

Brittany folds her arms defiantly. Christian shoots her a look but doesn't push her to agree.

Our first course arrives. I drape the cloth napkin across my lap and command my eyes not to roll as Brittany brags about her social media follow count and how all her other friends are "so jealous" that she got to swim with dolphins—never mind that she immediately scampered out of the water as soon as the post went live.

This is nice...

A few moments of silence pass as we all taste our food, and while I know what I'm putting in my mouth is five-star cuisine, it all tastes bland to me.

This...is...nice.

"Petra and I have an announcement," Christian says.

A sense of dread dawns in my stomach as he reaches for my mother's hand; she lets him take it with all the enthusiasm of someone reporting for jury duty.

"We decided it would be best to get married here in St. Thomas. After all, no one could ask for a better honeymoon." His voice is even and measured, like he's talking about the weather, not his marriage.

I squeeze my fork so hard I swear I feel it bend.

"When are you planning to do it?" I ask.

My mother's throat shifts as she swallows.

"It's done," she says.

I forget how to breathe.

"What?" Brittany snaps, scrunching up her face. "You guys had a wedding and didn't tell us?"

"There was no ceremony," Christian says. "We went to the local courthouse and got our marriage license."

"How romantic," she mutters.

"We'll have a ceremony next summer," my mom says, with feigned enthusiasm. "You girls can help plan it, if you'd like."

"Whatever." I'm not sure how much Brittany knows about the real reason behind our parents' marriage. But judging by her lackluster, "Congrats," and how quickly her attention shifts back to her dinner, I think it's safe to say she doesn't care enough to question it.

If reactions were on a spectrum, then Brittany and I would be on complete opposite ends. Instead of forcing myself to

produce an emotional reaction, I'm fighting not to fall apart.

Christian's gaze darts toward me as he releases my mom's hand. I twist my napkin in my lap and command my lips to curve.

"I didn't realize you guys were going to do it so soon," I tell them. "Congratulations."

Mom gives me a secret, grateful smile. She knows I'm faking it, but she doesn't know exactly *what* I'm faking or why.

I push my salad around my plate and pray for the ground to swallow me whole, as my mom and Christian launch into a conversation about the two of us moving into his apartment when we get back to the mainland. I know I should take Brittany's lead and pull out my phone, anything to distract myself, but I can't.

The initial shock of their news has washed away, leaving anger and betrayal in its wake.

How could he still marry my mom after what happened between us? Everything moved so fast, I didn't even have time to decide whether I was going to tell her about it. I still don't know if I *should* tell her, but now I feel like I *can't*.

Looking down, I let my hair fall like a curtain around my face, blocking out most of my view. I spend the rest of the dinner like that, with my head down and my fists clenched around my utensils as I pretend to eat.

"May I take your plate?" our server asks finally.

I nod. When she reaches over to pick up my dish, I chance a glance in Christian's direction and find him watching me. My breath catches. His crestfallen expression is so clear and anguished that I almost reach across the table to smooth out the crease between his eyes. It's a look of such longing and regret that it makes me wonder if he might still care about me.

But then I blink, and that yearning expression is gone, if it was ever there in the first place.

I can't take another second of this. I slide my chair back and stand up a little too quickly, drawing everyone's attention.

"I'm tired. I'm going back to the room."

I don't give anyone a chance to respond before I start walking, each step heavier and more labored than the last, like I'm trudging through mud.

Back in the suite, I don't bother to change my clothes before I curl up in bed with the blankets over my head and tears streaming onto the pillow.

This is not nice. Not nice at all...

CHAPTER 7



CHRISTIAN

“YOU REALLY DON’T HAVE TO HELP US UNPACK, CHRISTIAN,” Petra says.

I look over and find her leaning against the kitchen island with a weary expression. She seems to be having more bad days than good lately.

“It’s not a problem at all, really.”

After Dan’s boss came and took everything the girls couldn’t carry on their backs, there isn’t much here to unpack. Most of what I’m unloading is kitchen appliances and utensils that I asked her to order under the guise of wanting her to have everything she needed to entertain guests.

“Have you spoken to Brittany lately?” she asks, good-naturedly.

I open a box containing a new set of decorative bowls.

“She responded to a few of my texts. She’s starting her final exams soon.” Brittany returned to her mom’s as soon as we got back from St. Thomas. As her father, I shouldn’t say it, but I was relieved to see her go. Considering how rude my daughter was, I appreciate Petra asking after her, even if it’s only out of politeness.

“I remember those days,” she says. “Eden would stay up all night with her flashcards. I’d have to check on her to make sure she actually went to bed.”

“I don’t think that’ll be an issue for Brittany. It’s getting her to study that’s the challenge.”

Petra chortles. Having her in my apartment hasn't been nearly as intrusive as I thought it would be. For one, the penthouse is large enough that we can avoid each other when we want to forget that we're supposed to be married.

But Petra being in my home means *Eden* is in my home. That's a concept I still can't wrap my head around, partly because I hardly ever see her.

We've been back from St. Thomas for about a week now, and I can count on one hand the number of times we've crossed paths. She's avoiding me, and I don't blame her. What I did to that sweet girl is inexcusable. She *should* hate me. In fact, that's exactly what I was aiming for when I told her it was all a mistake.

When I overheard the things she said to Brittany about growing up with 'less than nothing' as a child, my heart shattered in my chest. I knew that Dan was in a bind when he came to me for help all those years ago, but back then, I thought what he needed was tough love. I didn't stop to think about his family's short-term needs. If I had, maybe Eden wouldn't have gone hungry.

I know it's not all my fault. Dan made his choices, but I can connect the dots far enough to where I see how my own inaction led to some of the hardest times in Eden's life. I'm partly to blame for her suffering. What right do I have asking her to call me daddy? I'm the reason her dad is dead.

Still, while I have good reason to push her away, I feel like the biggest piece of shit in the world. Looking back on the night we spent together, how she gazed up at me like I hung the moon, I'd give anything to take back the hurt I caused her. Anything to have her in my arms again, her taste on my tongue.

But that's not going to happen. Because she doesn't look at me anymore, and I don't look at her. That's the way it should be. How it should've been from the start.

I FINISH HELPING Petra unpack the kitchen and then retire to my home office to double-check the financial figures before I leave for my business trip. It's late by the time I shut down my laptop. A glance at the clock tells me it's almost midnight. I have to shower and pack and then call a car to take me to the airport.

I'll be in New York for two weeks, possibly three if I find a good reason to stick around. I'm sure Petra would appreciate the chance to settle in without me here, and it'll be good for me to be far away from Eden.

As I make my way from the office to my bedroom, I note the pieces of her I encounter. Reminders of her presence: her jacket left on the couch, the sweet smell of her perfume lingering in the hall, her teal bathing suit hanging up in the laundry room.

That last reminder made my stomach clench when I saw it. For the rest of the day, I was fighting back not only my guilt, but my arousal.

It'll be fine, I tell myself, as I step into the shower. *I have everything under control.*

But my cock betrays me, growing hard as my mind rewinds itself back to that night in my hotel room. I refuse to let myself go there, no matter how bad my balls ache or how long it's been since I orgasmed.

I get dressed and start packing. Clothes, shoes, toiletries. I head to the kitchen to grab a few protein bars and my favorite water bottle.

My body is on autopilot as I open the freezer and pull out the vodka I have stashed in the back. I'm not a heavy drinker, but lately I've been self-prescribing to help calm my mind down. Not too much, just enough to take the edge off.

I pour the vodka into a glass, about two shots' worth, and shoot it back. The cold burn warms my throat and chest. It feels good, like a punishment. What I deserve.

My whole body tenses when I hear the soft padding of bare feet. Rolling my shoulders, I pray that it's only Petra in need

of a glass of water or a snack.

But when I turn around, my heart slams, punching the air from my lungs. Eden steps through the doorway, rubbing at her eyes. She's tied her hair into a bun on the top of her head, but a few corkscrew locks have fallen out, framing her face and making her look like an angel. Her cheeks are dusted pink and there's a slight crease along her chin. She must've fallen asleep on her phone again.

My gaze slides down her body to the skimpy tank top and plaid shorts she has on. I swallow hard, noting the barest sliver of her soft belly peeking out above the waistband.

Though I've already seen her naked, there's something about seeing her in her sleepwear, having just woken up, that feels more intimate. More vulnerable.

Her hand falls away from her face and she sees me. She blinks a few times.

"Oh..." She breathes the word.

We stand there for a few seconds, staring at each other, before I clear my throat and say the first thing that pops into my head.

"Don't you think you should put on something warmer? It's December."

Eden's expression hardens. She walks fully into the kitchen, heading for the pantry and making a point *not* to so much as glance in my direction.

Just when I think she's going to ignore me completely, she mutters under her breath, "Wow, for a second it almost seemed like you cared about me."

"I do care." The words leave my mouth before I can thwart them.

She whirls around, rooting me in place with a scowl. The blue of her irises is so striking that I have to make a conscious effort not to take a step back.

"Don't lie to me, Christian."

“I’m not lying—”

“Then don’t be an asshole.” Her tone is sharp, venomous. “You don’t get to use me, reject me, *marry my mother*, and then act like you care about me.”

My throat tightens.

“You’re right. What I did to you was unforgivable. But that doesn’t change the fact that I do care about you, Eden.”

She scoffs, grabs a bag of popcorn, and walks past me toward the hallway. “Yeah? Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it.”

My arm moves of its own volition. I catch Eden’s wrist. The instant we touch, I feel electricity shoot up my arm.

“I’m sorry, Eden,” I whisper. “It’s...complicated.”

She stares at my hand wrapped around her wrist as a storm of emotions cross her gorgeous face. I half expect her to wrench free of my grasp and run to her bedroom without another word. But she doesn’t. Relief floods my body as she turns around to face me straight-on.

The anger in her gaze softens into something like sadness.

“Then un-complicate it,” she says.

I shake my head, taking a step closer to her. “It’s not that simple—”

“It is.” The earnestness in her voice is haunting. My chest aches. “You just say one word, and then another, and then another. And you keep going until you’ve taken back every hurtful thing you’ve ever said to me.”

I take a step toward her without meaning to. Here she is, this sharp, sensitive, beautiful girl, who has utterly consumed me for the last few weeks. And she’s all but ready to forgive me. I don’t deserve her forgiveness. I don’t deserve to be anywhere near her. But it’s as if there’s an invisible cord pulling me toward her, made of stronger stuff than I am, and impossible to ignore.

I brush a corkscrew curl hair away from her face. She gasps but otherwise she doesn't move.

"I don't want to hurt you again." I can't resist skimming my fingertips down her cheek to the column of her throat. She quivers under my touch.

"Then don't." She steps forward, leaving barely a breath between us.

Shaking my head, I say, "Eden, I can't—"

"Why not?" she demands, dropping the bag of popcorn to clutch at the front of my shirt. Her lip trembles, revealing her inner turmoil. "Isn't it enough to want to be with me?"

"There are other things we have to consider—"

"*Like what?*" She refuses to back down, the fire in her eyes returning with vigor.

Something inside me breaks.

I launch forward and capture Eden's lips in a kiss. Her body melts against mine as she loops her wrists around my neck. My hands capture her hips. I slip my thumbs beneath the hem of her thin tank top, desperate to feel her soft skin. She whimpers, and I claim the opportunity to deepen the kiss, caressing her tongue and stealing her breath.

Fuck, I've missed this. The taste of her, the feel of her, just...everything about her. I spin us around, placing her back to the counter, and slip my knee in between her legs. She moans as I press my thigh against her pussy.

"Oh, God..." She grinds against me, panting.

My voice comes out ragged when I ask her, "Does that feel good, baby?"

She nods frantically, her eyes narrow and glazed.

"Is this what my baby girl needs? To rub her sweet little pussy all over something hard?"

She suppresses a sob, and my heart breaks. What I'm doing isn't fair, but I can't stop the flood of dirty talk from pouring out of me.

“What was that?” I grind harder against her. “I couldn’t hear you, baby.”

“Yes,” she cries, her voice muffled by my shirt.

I tsk. “‘Yes’, what? Say it.”

She inhales a ragged breath. “Yes, Daddy. This is... This is exactly what I need.”

A smile consumes my face. Watching Eden grow flushed and aroused as she pleasures herself on my body makes me feel like I can take on the world. I make sure she can feel my hard cock pressed against her hip.

“Is that all you need, or is there something else?” I swear to God, Eden could ask me to fetch her a star and I would hop on the nearest dick rocket.

“I want you to t-touch me, Daddy.”

I feign confusion. “But I *am* touching you, baby girl.”

Puffs of breath tickle my neck as she struggles to find her words. “With your hands. I want you to touch me with your big, rough hands.”

I press a kiss to her cheek. “Good girl.”

Shifting my leg back, I slide my hand down the front of her sleep shorts. My cock throbs as my fingers graze her naked pussy. She’s not wearing any underwear.

I rub up and down her slit a few times, gathering her arousal on my fingertips.

Eden melts against me to the point that I think the only thing keep her up is my grip on her hip. When the heel of my palm presses against her clit, she shivers.

“Did Daddy find your secret spot?” I rasp.

“Oh, yes!” She grinds on my hand. “Play with my spot, Daddy.”

Slowly, I draw my fingers up until they hover over her clit. Keeping a steady pace, I rub tiny circles on her most sensitive spot, soaking up all of her whimpers and moans.

“Tell me how good it feels.” I breathe against her hair. The fruity scent of her shampoo fills my head. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to walk through a garden again without instantly becoming hard.

“It feels s-so good when you touch me there. So tingly and...and...” She rocks her hips in time with my strokes. “Please don’t stop.”

“I don’t plan to, baby.” My entire hand is slick with her juices. “Daddy’s not gonna stop touching you until you come so hard, you see fireworks.”

Unable to voice her words, Eden just nods and whimpers against my chest.

“I want you to come for me, baby, I want you to come because of *me*. Can you do that for Daddy?”

I didn’t think it was possible, but somehow her pussy gets even wetter.

“Y-yeah,” she stammers. “I’m gonna c-come for you, Daddy. Please just...don’t... *Ah!*”

Eden’s clit pulses against my fingers. Arousal drenches my hand as I continue to stroke her, letting her use me to ride out her orgasm. Her hips roll against my hand, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to rip my pants off and join her, right here in the kitchen.

When she finally settles down and her breathing slows, I withdraw my hand from her shorts. I readjust her clothes, smoothing and straightening them, as she sags against the counter.

A smile spreads across her face.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

She looks at me with complete adoration. But as reality sets in, I can’t help but wince.

“I want to be your daddy more than anything else in the world, Eden. But I don’t deserve the title.”

She squints. “Why not?”

Guilt burns like acid in my stomach. “Because it’s my fault that you had such a difficult childhood. And it’s my fault your dad is dead.”

Eden’s body stills as she studies my gaze, a look of confusion and shock dawning across her face. She doesn’t move when I press my lips to her forehead—the last time my lips will touch any part of her for weeks.

“I have to catch a flight to New York tonight,” I say.

Panic seizes her features. “You’re leaving?”

“Just for a few weeks.”

“But—”

I kiss her gently, cutting her off. “I’ll be home in time for Christmas, baby girl. I promise. This isn’t goodbye.”

“I want to believe you,” she whispers. “But I don’t know if I can.”

Her words hit like a slap, but with my track record, I deserve them. I nod.

Pulling away from Eden is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Still, it must be done. I don’t know how we’re going to make this work, sneaking around the apartment with her mom under the same roof. It almost seems doomed from the start. Maybe it is. All I know is that my life changed the moment Eden stepped onto my jet.

When I turn away from her, I half expect her to call after me, but she doesn’t.

And as I climb the stairs to my room, I can’t tell if it’s relief or regret that makes my throat tighten and my vision blurry.

CHAPTER 8



EDEN

Two weeks later...

THE SCENT OF PINE FILLS THE ROOM AS I STRING RED AND white lights around the fir tree.

“Oh, now that’s just lovely, Eden,” Mom says from her spot on the couch.

I turn to her and smile. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“Not at all. It’s absolutely perfect.”

Beaming, I finish wrapping the lights and then pick up a couple of glass-ball ornaments. Mom and I have spent the day decorating. Well, *I’ve* spent the day decorating, with Mom mostly keeping me company from the couch. She was able to help a little bit this morning, but she tired quickly, so I told her to rest.

Decorating for Christmas is one of my most treasured childhood memories. When I was little, our trees resembled something closer to the Charlie Brown twig rather than the monster at Rockefeller Center, but I loved them all regardless.

This year, we had a big, beautiful tree delivered to Christian’s apartment—thanks to the expense account he set up for us. Mom and I may have gone a little overboard with the lights, ornaments, and other holiday decorations we found online, but since this is the first Christmas without my dad around, I wanted to make it special for my mom.

I hang glass balls, wooden reindeer, and festive ribbon around the tree while Mom hums along to the holiday music

streaming on Christian's surround sound system. It's been two weeks since Christian touched me and made me come in the kitchen. In his absence, I've had time to think about everything we've done together, and everything he said to me that night.

At first, I didn't know what to think when he said it was his fault my dad was dead. I stayed awake for hours after he left for the airport, my mind reeling as I tried to wrap my head around his words. I decided to ask my mom for more details about what happened back then—without mentioning Christian's recent statements.

From what I could puzzle together, it seems that Christian blames himself for not helping my dad out all those years ago. While it's true that we may have been more comfortable in the short-term if he had given my dad money, it's also possible he would have squandered it. There's no way to know how things might have turned out otherwise. All I know is that I don't blame Christian for my difficult childhood or my father's death.

"Come sit down with me," my mom says, pulling me from my thoughts. "You've been working all afternoon. You should take a moment to enjoy your efforts."

I find a spot for the ornament in my hand and then join my mother on the couch.

The Christmas tree gleams and sparkles. Resting my head on Mom's shoulder, I let my gaze roam lazily over the boughs.

"It's beautiful," I say. "Do you think Christian will like it?"

"I don't see why he wouldn't. If he doesn't like it, you have my blessing to call him a Scrooge."

I laugh. Glancing at the grandfather clock beside the antique bookcase, my foot taps anxiously against the side of the couch. Christian promised me he'd be home before Christmas. With each passing day, I become more worried that he's going to change his mind about us.

These past two weeks without him have been torturous. It's like he's left a hole in my chest where my heart should be.

I miss him most at night when I have nothing else to distract myself, when memory and fantasy collide. I imagine him kissing me awake with a hand between my legs, as he whispers filthy, delicious things against my lips.

I know I should temper my fantasies. The Christian in my head isn't the man who married my mother, and it crushes my heart a little more each day when he doesn't walk through the front door. I don't know *when* he'll be back—*if* he'll be back. And the more space he takes up in my head, the more painful his absence feels.

The only contact we've had with him is through his personal assistant, who calls my mom every day to check in and make sure we have everything we need. Mom says she's nice. Still, I don't want to raise any alarms by repeatedly asking her when he plans to return. So I keep my worries to myself and hope that, this time, he'll keep his promises.

Mom is helping me choose between red and gold stockings for the mantel when I hear the private elevator ding in the foyer.

My heart jumps into my throat. I smooth down the front of my shirt and run my fingers through my hair, my pulse sprinting like a rabbit. My lips curve into a smile that I couldn't suppress even if I wanted to.

Footsteps sound in the hall.

"Christian?" I say.

My smile falters the instant Brittany enters the living room.

"Wow," she says, smacking her gum. "I don't think this place has seen a Christmas tree in over a decade."

"Hello, Brittany," my mom says kindly. "We weren't expecting you."

"Why would you? It's not like I called." She pulls off her white beanie and shrugs off her perfectly tailored coat. Honestly, she looks like she just stepped out of a Burberry winter catalogue. If she wasn't such a garbage human, I would

tell her she looks nice. “You guys certainly didn’t waste any time leaving your mark on the place.”

“Christmas has always been a special time for our family,” Mom says.

“Whatever. It’s not like my dad will care.” Brittany’s gaze, which is almost fond while looking at the tree, hardens when it lands on me. She smirks. “Have you lost weight, Eden? That shirt looks loose on you.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “I wouldn’t know. Your dad doesn’t have a scale.”

“Maybe you should order one online at whatever bargain-basement department store you got these decorations from.”

Mom crosses her long legs and twines her fingers on her knee. “If you’d like to help us decorate, we could go shopping at one of *your* preferred retailers.”

Brittany tilts her head like she’s thinking it over.

“Nah, I’ll pass. You guys clearly have it covered. And why wouldn’t you? This is your house now, too.” Her words say one thing, but her tone is clearly warning us not to get too comfortable in her space.

“Wow,” I say flatly. “Thank you for acknowledging that, Brittany. I’m sure it was difficult for you.”

Shifting her weight to one foot, Brittany pops her hip out. “Yeah, it was.”

“What can we do for you, Brittany?” Mom asks with a sigh, already tired of her stepdaughter’s sarcasm.

“Oh, my dad didn’t tell you? I’m going to be staying here for a couple of weeks.”

My stomach drops at the prospect of having to reside under the same roof as this wannabe Gossip Girl for that long. “You can’t be serious—”

Brittany’s phone rings, cutting me off.

“Speak of the devil.” She answers her phone with a high-pitched, “Hey, Dad! ... Yeah, it was great. ... Uh-huh, totally.”

I try not to make it obvious that I'm listening in on her conversation now that I know Christian is on the other end. Sadly, subterfuge was never one of my strong suits. She catches me watching her out of the corner of my eye.

"I'm here with both of them now, unfortunately." Scowling, Brittany steps out of the room, taking her one-sided conversation with her.

"She's always so...pleasant to be around," Mom says, shooting a side-eye my way.

I place the stocking I've been holding on the mantel and then rub my eyes. "Yeah, she's a real peach."

We get a few minutes of blissful quiet before Brittany struts back into the room.

"It's settled. Dad's coming back tonight, and I'll be staying through Christmas. I'm going to go unpack my stuff. Don't bother me, okay?" She smiles like a hawk that just ripped apart a forest mouse, and then walks out of the room.

Once my frustration has a chance to dissipate, my mind finally registers what's just occurred.

Christian's coming back tonight. But is he coming back for me, or for Brittany?

"I've never thought I'd be so grateful for all four thousand square feet of his apartment," Mom quips.

I hum my assent as apprehension and excitement swirl in my stomach. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't ecstatic about the prospect of seeing Christian again, but I'm nervous about how things will be between us. There's still so much we need to talk about, and now that Brittany's going to be staying here, we'll have to be even more cautious.

Assuming he hasn't changed his mind about us...

One thing's for sure, this is going to be a very *different* Christmas from what I'm used to, in more ways than one.

CHAPTER 9



CHRISTIAN

I GRIP THE STEERING WHEEL SO TIGHTLY THAT MY KNUCKLES turn white. I've been parked in the underground garage for the past ten minutes, trying to gather the strength to take the elevator to the penthouse.

What keeps me glued to the leather interior of my Aston Martin is the knowledge that Eden will be there. And the second I lay eyes on her, I won't be able to recall why indulging this obsession with my stepdaughter is a *terrible* idea.

But I can't stay in this parking garage forever. Furthermore, I won't leave Eden and Petra to contend with my daughter's attitude on their own.

When Brittany called to tell me she wanted to spend Christmas with me for a change, I knew she must've had a fight with her mother. I didn't want to say yes, but what practical reason did I have to say no? I settled for a stern reminder that she would be a guest in what is now Petra and Eden's home.

Of course, I know better than to think she'll magically transform into a picture of congeniality overnight, so I chartered a private jet to bring me back to Chicago as soon as my last meeting finished up.

It's a little after two in the morning when I finally step through the front door. I roll my suitcase through the foyer and into the hall as silently as possible. The pleasant aroma of French-onion soup lingers in the air. I vaguely recall my chef,

Estella, mentioning that Eden had requested it a few times since the weather turned freezing.

Leaving my suitcase in the hall, I head into the kitchen and pour myself a nightcap, sending a prayer to whatever god is listening that it'll be enough to calm my nerves. I take my drink into the darkened living room, then freeze when my gaze lands on something large, bulky, and unfamiliar beside the fireplace.

“What the hell?”

I switch on the light.

I'm taken aback by the sight of a tall, broad, beautifully decorated Christmas tree. I move closer, searching for a switch or a plug. Instead, I find a small white remote control on the mantel. As I press the power button, I can't help but smile as the already magnificent tree becomes even more brilliant.

“Well, damn...”

Glancing around the space, I see that the decorations don't stop at the tree. Nearly every spare surface in the room has been Christma-fied. It all looks so warm and inviting, so unlike my usual cold, functional, simplistic style. My heart swells as I run my hand across the red and green quilt resting on the back of the leather sofa.

I don't have to wonder if Eden did this. Deep in my soul, I know this is her doing.

She's made my house a home.

I can practically see her now, dressed in a dark green sweater that makes her blue eyes pop. She would hear me enter the room and gaze up at me with a face so full of joy and kindness.

“What do you think, Christian?” she'd ask, holding out two differently colored ribbons for me to choose from. As I skimmed my fingers across the ribbon—not stopping at her hand, her wrist, her forearm—she would bite her lip.

“Pick whichever one you'd like to see wrapped around your wrists, baby girl.”

I groan and turn away from the fantasy, but it's too late. I'm already picturing Eden tied up in ribbons with a large bow sitting just below her navel. My pants tighten substantially as I imagine loosening the bow to reveal my present...

"Get yourself together," I grumble, and finish the rest of my drink.

I switch off the lights and make my way back to the kitchen in the dark. I place the empty glass in the sink, collect my bags, and head toward my bedroom, careful not to make too much noise. Halfway down the hall, I hesitate before a closed door, my body thrumming with tension and something hungrier.

It's too risky, I tell myself. Just keep walking. You'll see her tomorrow.

But my body refuses to obey. Tomorrow feels too distant when I know she's right behind this door, waiting for me to kiss her, touch her, taste her. I can already feel how wet she'd be by the time I reached into her panties...

I turn toward Eden's door and quietly ease it open. Her room is dark and silent, aside from her soft, rhythmic breaths. I step inside, careful not to let my suitcase bump the furniture. As my eyes adjust, I can easily make out Eden's sleeping form.

The bed is soft underneath me as I sit down on the very edge.

My heart thumps in my chest as I gaze down at her face. The moonlight streaking through the window dusts across her cheeks like blush, making her skin glow. When she shifts, her lips get caught in the moonbeam, and I'm transfixed.

I lean down and brush my lips over hers, featherlight. She sighs in her sleep.

"Daddy's home, baby girl," I whisper.

I gently stroke her cheek and then continue down her neck, to her chest, all the way to the neckline of her tank top. A quiet groan rumbles up from my throat as I watch her nipples pebble, pushing at the thin fabric of her shirt like they're

begging for attention. My hands ache to give them the care they so desperately need.

I circle the small nubs with my thumbs a few times before I brush against them directly. Her nipples instantly grow harder, needier, stiff enough to pinch. Driven by her body's obvious need, I grasp the pebbles between my thumb and forefinger and squeeze gently.

A moan floats from Eden's lips.

Her eyelashes flutter.

"Daddy?" Her voice is light and sleepy.

I smile as a sense of contentedness surges through me. It's been too long since she's called me that.

"I'm right here, baby girl."

She blinks a few more times before her eyes finally focus on me.

"C-Christian? You're back?" She rises to a seated position. I let my hands drop to the blanket over her thighs. My eyes have adjusted well enough to the dark for me to see the smile curving her lips. Before I can respond, she throws her arms around me and murmurs into my neck, "Welcome home, Daddy."

I hold her tight against me. Having her in my arms after being away from her is more overwhelming than I expected. It feels like the final missing piece in my life has slid into place. I've never felt so affected by a welcome-home hug, not even from my own daughter, and it scares me how natural and *right* it feels.

"Thank you, Eden. I'm sorry I woke you, but I couldn't wait 'til morning to see your face."

"It's okay—no, it's *better* than okay. I'm so happy you're home. I thought..."

I feel her body tense in my arms.

"You thought I might disappoint you again," I say, finishing her thought. She nods guiltily. I stroke her back. "I

understand. I'm sorry I ever gave you a reason to doubt me. But I came back to tell you that I'm in this, no matter the risks. Next time I have to go somewhere, I'm taking you with me."

"I thought you came back for Brittany."

"God, no, sweetheart. I mean, of course I wouldn't leave you and Petra to deal with her by yourselves. But I'm here because I'm done trying to stay away from you."

She sighs and relaxes. "Good."

After a long moment, she pulls back to look at me, and I feel her blue gaze reaching into my depths, seeing me as I truly am. She rests a hand on my cheek.

"I thought about what you said before you left, about you being the reason my dad is dead."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know. I figured it out for myself. And I want you to know that I don't blame you for what happened to him, or for turning him away when he came to you for money when I was a kid. You did what you thought was right."

"But it wasn't the right choice. I see that now." I shake my head with a grimace. "I should've taken care of you and your mother."

"You're taking care of us now. That's what matters."

She leans forward until our lips are a millimeter apart.

"Take care of me, Daddy," Eden whispers.

The cage of my composure bursts open. I capture her lips with a groan, and she offers me a sweet whimper in return. I swallow it, desperate to pull more soft music from her body. She tastes just as delicious as I remember. I deepen our kiss, trying to memorize every inch of her tongue. Like the good girl she is, she follows my lead, surrendering to my dominance and falling back onto her pillow.

Without breaking the kiss, I pull the covers back and position myself on top of her, needing to feel as much of her body against me as possible. I nip at her lips as I draw my

hand up her side and cup her breast. She's warm and soft in my hand, and so utterly perfect. She arches toward me with a muffled moan, as I thumb her hardened nipple through her shirt.

"Does my little girl like it when I tease her nipples?" I ask, grazing my teeth along her jaw.

"Yes, Daddy. Your hands make me feel so good."

I hum against her skin. She shivers and bucks her hips.

"Just my hands, baby? What about my mouth? Didn't Daddy's tongue feel good, too?"

She whimpers. "Oh, yes. That was s-so good, too." She grips my shoulder with a trembling hand. "C-could you do that again?"

I rise to look at her gorgeous face in the moonlight when I ask her, "You want me to lick your pussy again, baby?"

She bites her lip and nods.

I plant a gentle kiss on her cheek and begin shifting down her body.

"What my baby girl wants, she gets."

Her hips give a small thrust up as I lift her shirt and draw my wet tongue from her navel to the top of her sleep shorts.

"Thank you, Daddy."

I hook my thumbs into her bottoms—no panties again, *good God*—and slowly pull them off. A deep, rasping growl pours from me as I take in the sight and scent of her bare pussy. I skim my fingers along her inner thighs and watch as her arousal drips down to her ass.

"Look, at you, baby," I murmur. "You're a fucking feast."

I run my flattened tongue upward from her entrance to her clit. She gasps and reaches for me, fingers curling in my hair. I lick her clit again, and she tugs more firmly, sending a sharp spark of electricity straight to my hard dick. I rut into the mattress as I drag my tongue through her folds and circle her clit in languid motions.

Eden whimpers, wriggling her hips, and twisting her fingers deeper into my hair.

“*Fuck,*” I moan, coming up for a breath. “You’re so fucking eager, baby girl. I love the way you squirm.”

Whimpering, she tips her head back, her eyes pinched closed.

“Look at me, Eden,” I growl. She does as she’s told. “I want you to watch me eat this pretty pussy. Can you do that for Daddy?”

“Uh-huh.” She nods.

Maintaining eye contact, I lower my face between her legs and run my tongue through her soaked pussy. Watching her expression change as I adjust my technique is addicting. If I want to see her bite her lip, all I have to do is flick her clit... just...like...this.

She captures her bottom lip between her teeth and moans.

“That’s my good girl.” I suck at her sweet little pearl. “Let’s see how fast Daddy can make you come.”

“Wait, don’t,” she says.

I pause and lift my head in concern.

“What is it, baby? Is something wrong?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing’s wrong, Daddy. I just...” A bashful smile pulls at her kiss-bruised lips. “I want to feel you inside of me when I come.”

My heart slams against my sternum as I study her for a long moment.

“You want me inside you?”

She rests her hand on her mound. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since you left.”

I exhale a ragged breath as my mind clouds with the fantasy of burying my cock deep inside her. But I need to be sure that’s what she’s asking.

“You want Daddy’s fingers inside of you?” I trace my fingertip around her entrance. She whimpers. “Or something else?”

Eden swallows hard. “I want...something else.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” Slowly, I slide my middle finger inside her, and relish the feeling of her tight, velvety walls squeezing me.

“Oh, God, yes.” She’s wet enough that I can fit a second finger inside of her without meeting much resistance. Still, she’s never had anything as big as my cock in her pussy. I have to make sure she’s prepared.

“You need to be clearer than that, baby girl. Tell me exactly what you want.”

“I want your c-cock inside me, Daddy.” She winces as I spread my fingers, stretching her walls.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m *sure* I’m sure! Please...”

She inhales deeply and exhales slow, as I attempt to fit three fingers into her pussy. It’s not until I begin stroking her clit with my thumb that she starts to thrust against me, taking all three of my fingers inside her of her own accord.

“That’s a good girl. Show Daddy how much you can take.”

I continue fucking her with my fingers as I reach down to untuck my shirt from my slacks. She helps me pull my dress shirt off, then runs her soft hands over my chest while I undo my belt. Finally, I slide my fingers out of her pussy to get rid of the rest of my clothes.

Eden’s wide eyes take in my naked body, bathed in moonlight, her gaze landing on my dick. I’m so fucking hard, I throb, twitching and dripping pre-come just for her.

“I almost forgot how big you are,” she whispers. “A-are you even going to fit?”

I hold myself in a loose grasp and give a few strokes, spreading pre-come over the head.

“I’ll go slow, baby girl, and you’ll adjust. And then it’ll feel really good.”

She nods and spreads her legs wider. I slide in between them, aligning my hips with hers. Her gaze locks on my hand as I guide my cock to her entrance. She tenses, her legs shaking at my sides.

“You have to stay relaxed, okay baby girl? And if you need me to stop or pull out, just let me know.”

Settling back against her pillow, Eden takes one last deep breath.

“I’m ready.”

I kiss her to distract her as I carefully push the head of my cock inside. As soon as she starts to whimper, I pause my movements.

“You okay?”

Not finding the words, she just nods.

I kiss the tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

“You’re doing great, baby. So beautiful and perfect. You feel amazing around me.” And she does, so warm and tight. I fight the urge to snap my hips forward; she can’t take a pounding like that yet.

Inch by painstaking inch, I thrust my cock into Eden, pausing now and then to decorate her face with light kisses and sing her praises.

“Such a good girl,” I rasp. “Daddy’s tight little baby...”

It takes a few minutes for her to fully adjust so that I can sink all the way inside. By the time my hips are pressed flush against hers, I’m already a goner.

“There we go, baby.” My voice shakes a little bit. “You did so good for me.”

Eden smiles her signature sweet smile. “You’re finally inside me, Daddy.”

“I am, baby girl. How does it feel?”

“Full.” She lays her hand on her lower stomach.

“I can feel you all the way up here.”

My hips rock involuntarily, easing my cock out and thrusting back in. “Fuck, that’s the hottest thing you’ve ever said to me, baby.”

Eden gasps. “*Oh*, that feels...” She exhales, her eyelids drooping. “...So deep...and thick.”

I kiss her lips as I begin to thrust, in and out, slowly moving faster. Her moans grow louder and more high-pitched, and I drink them down like fine wine. She wraps her legs around me as I pick up the pace, giving in to my own enjoyment while still making sure Eden is moaning with pleasure, and not pain.

Each pump brings me closer and closer to release until I’m hovering just above it.

“Daddy, I think I’m gonna come,” she says, almost slurring her words.

“Me too. *God*, you feel so good, Eden.” Her name falls from my lips like a prayer. In this moment she is my prayer, my only wish, my whole world. I care for nothing and no one besides the gorgeous woman beneath me. I need to feel her clench around me.

I bring my hand in between our bodies and rub her clit with my thumb.

She moans and trembles.

“Oh, it’s coming, Daddy!”

I keep my pace steady as I thrust, bringing her closer and closer to her own steep edge.

“Stay with me, baby, you’re almost there. You’re doing so good. You’ve been perfect for me tonight, so warm and wet and beautiful. If only you could see yourself. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. My perfect, soft, tight little baby ___”

Eden's pussy clamps around my cock. She moans, her muscles clenching and unclenching around me. My own orgasm follows a second later, my body tensing and my cock throbbing. Pleasure shoots down my spine as I release inside of her. She feels like an absolute dream, pulling my cock deeper, milking my seed.

I don't stop rubbing her clit until she's done twitching, making sure she's fully ridden out her pleasure. Finally, she groans and pushes my hand away weakly. I lay down beside her with a contented smile, wrapping a lock of her hair around my finger.

A long moment passes before she opens her eyes and blinks up at me.

"How was that, baby girl?" I ask.

"That was...that was amazing," she says with a breathless chuckle. Her pretty pink lips turn up at the corners, and I'm struck by such an immense sense of adoration for her that I open my mouth before I have a chance to think clearly.

"I love you, Eden."

Her eyes go wide. "What?"

My pulse leaps. I didn't mean to say the words right now, but I don't have to dig too deep to know in my heart that they're true.

"I love you," I tell her again, this time with more conviction. "I've been in love with you for weeks, since that first dinner in St. Thomas. I love you, and I'm tired of denying my feelings."

The longer she stares at me without responding, the more nervous I become. *Fuck, it's too much. I know it's too much...*

"I don't expect you to feel the same way," I say quickly. "I just needed to tell you. It's okay if—"

I'm interrupted by her lips moving over mine.

"I love you, too, Christian." She kisses me again, taking the lead and sliding her tongue into my mouth. She rolls us over until she's resting on top of me, with my spent cock

twitching between my legs. “I love you, Daddy,” she says again, “I love you, I love you.”

I can’t remember a time when I was ever so happy to hear those three words. Tilting my head back, I run my fingers through her hair, as I let her lay claim to my lips and neck.

“I can’t stop saying it,” she whispers with a sigh. “I love you, Daddy.”

I rub between her shoulder blades. “Good thing I’ll never get tired of hearing it.”

She nestles into my side, snuggling closer to me. After a long, stretch of companionable silence, I feel her muscles go taut.

“How do we make this work?” she asks.

I kiss the crown of her head. “You mean, how do we hide this from your mom?”

“And Brittany. She’s staying here now.”

“Right.” I sigh heavily. “I almost forgot. ... We’ll just have to be careful. Draw up a set of rules and stick to them.”

“What kind of rules?”

“No kissing or touching in the common areas.”

“You mean like the kitchen?” she says, brow arched.

I smirk. “Yes, smarty pants, like the kitchen. During the day, you’re my stepdaughter and I’m just your stepdad.”

“And at night?” She skims her fingernails down the center of my chest to my navel, then lower... I catch her wrist and bring her hand to my lips.

“At night, after everyone’s gone to bed, I’ll come visit you, just like this.”

She sighs. “I guess that’s easy enough.”

“Oh, it won’t be easy at all. Not when you’re sitting across from me at the dinner table and every inch of my body is dying to feel you pressed against me.” I kiss the inside of her palm. “But we’ll make it work because we have to.”

“You promise?” She looks up at me, complete vulnerability swimming in her eyes.

I rest our foreheads together and make a vow against her lips.

“I promise, baby girl.”

CHAPTER 10



EDEN

I OPEN MY EYES TO SUNLIGHT STREAMING INTO MY ROOM. Reaching out, I feel the cool, empty sheet beside me. The only clue that someone else was in my bed last night is the slight indent in the pillow and the subtle scent of cedarwood cologne—plus the ache between my thighs.

As I roll onto my back, I slap a hand over my mouth to stop myself from squealing. Maybe it was all a dream, my mind's way of comforting me in Christian's absence. Shaking my head, I sit upright and pull back the covers. The pink stain on the white sheet is all the evidence I need.

I had sex with my stepdad last night.

Just thinking about it makes me fall back onto my pillow with a contented sigh.

So this is what love feels like.

I remember how elated I was when I woke up and found him on my bed, touching my breasts and making my pussy ache. Then he started calling me his *baby girl* again, making me feel so good and special. Like something valuable he felt honored to touch, a piece of art meant to be handled reverently.

The combination of his tender touch and his dark, hungry gaze sparked a fire inside me. Even now, I still burn from the memory.

Everything about last night was *perfect*. He was so patient with me, so careful and deliberate, and the pride I felt when I

managed to take his whole cock inside me, was like winning the lottery. He was so *big*, and he felt so *good*, and for the first few seconds, I was overwhelmed with so much pain and pleasure, I thought I might pass out. But I didn't. I stayed lucid, and I enjoyed every second of my first penetrative sexual experience.

I can't wait to do it again.

But the elation I feel isn't just about the sex. Our connection flows so much deeper than pure physical attraction. I've never wanted to be this vulnerable with another person. I feel safe with Christian, like I can be myself completely, and there's nothing I could do that would make him turn away. Likewise, I love every new thing I discover about him. I've forgiven him for pushing me away, and I trust that he means it when he says he'll never leave me again.

Cradling my pussy with both hands, I roll onto my side. It's wonderful that Christian and I can finally act on our feelings, though I'll admit it hurt my heart when he had to return to his own cold bed. But I'll keep our secret for as long as I have to if it means I get to be his baby girl when we're alone.

I linger in bed until my stomach demands I get up and find some breakfast. After a quick shower to wash the scent of sex from my body, I gather up my sheets and quietly deposit them in the laundry room for the housekeeper to wash.

Following the smell of fresh coffee, I'm thrilled to find Christian working on his tablet in the kitchen, nursing his own steaming mug.

"Good morning," I say, feeling the warmth rise into my cheeks.

Christian's gaze pours over me like honey above the rim of his mug.

"Good morning, Eden. How did you sleep?"

"Very well, thank you." I accept the cup of coffee he pours for me, letting our fingers brush. "How about you?"

"I slept better than I have in years."

We share a conspiratorial smile. It takes a lot more mental fortitude than I thought it would to keep myself from reaching for him. But we aren't alone in the house.

"Is Brittany up yet?" I ask.

"She left a little while ago to go hang out with some friends."

I nod and take a sip of coffee, humming my pleasure as the sweet brew warms my bones. Christian watches me openly, his eyes saying everything that his lips cannot. Like how much he appreciates the sound I just made, and how badly he wants to hear me make it again, for different reasons. I flash him a smile that I hope conveys my desire to feel his hands on my body again.

He clears his throat. "Shall we move to the living room? I'd like to get another look at that tree."

"Sure." I force myself to stop thinking about all the ways I want him to touch me and follow him into the living room with my mug.

He settles down in a recliner while I claim a spot on the couch.

"You did a wonderful job decorating," he says, with a glance around the room. "I take it you and your mother go all out for Christmas every year."

"In recent years, yes. It was my dad's favorite holiday." My voice cracks at the mention of my father. Christian frowns like he wants to rush over and comfort me. I wave him off. "I'm okay, really. It just hits harder sometimes. That's all."

"Of course." He doesn't look convinced. I take a deep breath and retrain my mouth into a smile.

"I had no idea you could get a real tree delivered to your house," I say with a soft chuckle. "Rich people really do live in a completely different world."

"It takes some getting used to."

"I'm not sure if I'll ever be used to it. But I'll admit, it's nice being able to afford to buy people nice presents for the

holidays. Which reminds me, I still have to go shopping for my mom's Christmas gift."

"What are you thinking of getting her?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a piece of jewelry or a soft sweater. She doesn't like knickknacks or single-use appliances. I usually try to get her something sentimental."

"What are you doing now?"

I shrug. "I don't have any specific plans."

"Then it's settled."

"But...don't you have to work?"

"For you, work can wait."

I'm suddenly overcome with so much love and gratitude for this man that my eyes start to water. "Christian, I appreciate it, but you don't have to—"

"Daddy's rules don't just pertain to discretion, Eden." His gaze darkens. I feel my nipples tighten against my top. My pulse races as he rises from the chair to stand close to me. "If I want to take you to every designer boutique in the city, you'll go along willingly. Understood?"

I gaze up at him through my lashes and swallow hard.

"Yes, Daddy."

He leans toward me, bracing his hands on the back and arm of the sofa, caging me in with his body. "And if I want to spend the day showering my little girl with more gifts than her little arms can carry, she'll be a good sport and take what I give her without complaint."

I gasp as he runs his knuckles down the side of my face.

"What do you say, Eden?"

He dents my bottom lip with his thumb. I can already feel my inner muscles tightening beneath his firm stare.

"Yes, Daddy."

Christian smiles, satisfied. "Good girl. We'll leave as soon as you're ready"

He takes a step back, giving me space to stand up. My stomach flutters as I rise on unsteady feet. “I’ll just grab some breakfast.”

“No need,” he says. “I’ll take you out for breakfast. I know where to find the fluffiest pancakes in the city.”

CHAPTER 11



CHRISTIAN

EDEN SIPES HOT COCOA FROM A HOLIDAY-THEMED TAKEAWAY cup as she gazes out the passenger-side window. I keep my focus on the road, but I can't help sneaking a few glances at her in my peripheral vision.

We've just finished up with our Christmas shopping, and I'm genuinely shocked to admit that today has been one of the most enjoyable days I've had in years. Traveling from store to store with Eden, holding her hand, watching her smile broaden each time she found something she thought her mother might appreciate... There's nothing like it, and nothing better. Except maybe the pout she put on whenever I insisted on buying her *another* expensive jacket or a white gold Cartier charm bracelet.

I love being able to provide everything Eden needs and wants. I know she doesn't *need* me to take care of her; she's an incredibly self-sufficient young woman. But she works hard to care for her mother, to the extent that it seems like she's putting off her own dreams of attending medical school. Anything I can do to ease her stress or give her a chance to breathe is worth it, no matter how much it costs.

I park in the underground parking garage. Eden is so excited that she hops out of the SUV before I can even turn off the engine. She's already loading up her arms with bags and packages when I meet her at the back of the vehicle.

"Need some help there, little girl?" I tease.

She smiles sheepishly. "Maybe."

“Then let me.” I reward her grateful smile with a sweet kiss.

Between the two of us, we manage to get everything up to the apartment in one trip. Since we opted for giftwrapping, all she has to do is arrange the presents beneath the tree. I stand back and watch her reposition them according to whatever design she’s aiming for in her head.

The sincere enjoyment on her face warms my chest and makes me want to kiss her right here in front of the Christmas tree.

So I do.

She gasps as I gently tilt her face up so I can reach her lips. I know it’s dangerous and against the rules, but I can’t help myself. She’s too damn adorable.

“Someday I’m going to tell everyone that you’re mine,” I tell her.

She smiles against my lips, opening her mouth to allow me to deepen the kiss.

A soft noise like a *yawn* sounds from the hallway. Quickly, we pull apart, putting a respectable distance between us in time for Petra to enter the room.

“Oh, good, you’re back,” Petra says. I pray she doesn’t think twice about Eden’s flushed cheeks and my creased suit.

“Hey Mom,” Eden says, a little breathless. “What’re you doing out of bed?”

“I was feeling better this afternoon, so I decided to walk around for a little bit.”

Eden smiles at her mother. “That’s great, Mom. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

Petra hums in agreement, her gaze landing on the presents under the tree. “My goodness, Eden, did you buy the whole store?”

“Oh, well...” Eden wrings her hands together. “Christian helped me shop for presents for everyone.”

Petra turns to me, her gaze shrewd and curious. “You went shopping together?”

“I had the afternoon off,” I say, keeping my tone casual, even as my pulse picks up. Despite the fact that I tower over Petra, I find her assessing stare unsettling. This woman has the power to take away the most important person in my world.

“It’s getting close to dinnertime.” Eden takes her mother’s hand and guides her toward the door. “I was thinking we could make *kotlet de volaille*. We haven’t made it in a while.”

“That does sound nice,” Petra agrees, letting Eden bring her to the kitchen.

I spend another minute in the living room, trying to collect myself and calm my sprinting pulse. When I finally join the women in the kitchen, Eden and Petra are in full *Hell’s Kitchen* mode, pulling various ingredients from the cabinets, fridge, and spice drawer.

“What’s on the menu tonight, chefs?” I ask.

“*Kotlet de volaille*,” Eden says. “It’s basically the Polish version of Chicken Kiev.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Petra raises an eyebrow. “You like to cook, Christian?”

“I’m no Iron Chef, but I know my way around a kitchen.”

“In that case—” Petra points at the potatoes on the counter. “—why don’t you peel the potatoes for the *placki ziemniaczane*?”

“Potato pancakes,” Eden translates.

“Very well,” I say. “I’ll do it with relish, though I can’t shake the feeling that I’m merely being placated.”

Eden laughs. “Don’t take it personally. Mom’s kind of a control freak when it comes to Polish food.”

“They’re my mother’s recipes,” Petra says with a shrug.

I find the peeler and begin skinning the potatoes, stealing every glance I can spare in Eden’s direction. When Petra’s

hands start to shake, Eden discreetly takes over.

“Mom, remind me how much oil goes in the pan?”

“Here, I’ll do it.” Petra washes her hands and then moves over to the stove, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Eden has now taken up her previous post.

I can’t help smiling to myself at how thoughtful Eden is regarding her mother’s limitations. Every minute I spend with her makes me fall more and more in love.

The three of us keep up the light conversation as we finish making dinner. Just as the three of us are sitting down to eat, the elevator dings in the foyer.

My jaw clenches as Brittany waltzes into the dining room.

“What’s all this?” Her lip curls as she surveys the table.

“Polish stuffed chicken and potato pancakes,” I tell her, gaze narrowed. “There’s more food in the kitchen, if you’d like to join us.”

Part of me hopes she already ate.

“I’d *love* to have dinner with you guys.” Her lips pull apart in a wide smile, and I’m instantly on high alert.

Brittany disappears into the kitchen and emerges with a plate of food and a handful of silverware. I watch her closely throughout the meal, wondering what her game is. I catch Eden watching her, too. But as rude as Brittany has been in the past, she’s the picture of decorum tonight.

“We’ll have to decide on a menu for Christmas dinner,” Petra says. “You’ll be here for Christmas, won’t you, Brittany?”

My daughter nods. “Yes, I will.”

“Do you have a favorite dish or cuisine?”

Brittany takes what seems like an excessive amount of time to chew and swallow her chicken. “Not especially. I’m *much* more interested in the presents. Speaking of presents, what are you getting me this year, Dad?”

I eye her warily. “If I told you, that would ruin the surprise.”

“Oh, but I’m just *dying* to know. How about you let me guess?”

“Fine,” I say with a sigh. “You get *one* guess.”

“How about...a white gold charm bracelet from Cartier.”

My whole body goes taut as my mind wanders to the charm bracelet I bought for Eden this afternoon, the same one she made sure to hide in her room instant we arrived home.

“Nope,” I say curtly. “Good guess, though.”

“Really?” Brittany crosses her arms. “I guess I just assumed, since I saw you and Eden shopping there this afternoon.”

Eden’s eyes widen in fear. I fight to keep my expression neutral as I raise my glass of red wine to my lips.

Petra frowns at her daughter. “Eden, please tell me you didn’t spend *that* much on gifts.”

“Not to worry, Petra,” I say quickly. “I wouldn’t dream of letting Eden bankrupt herself on a piece of overpriced jewelry.” I meet Brittany’s smirk with a scowl of my own. “Join me in the kitchen for a moment, Brittany?”

Looking like the cat that ate the canary, she hops out of her seat and practically bounces out of the room. I follow her out, giving Eden’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze along the way. I have no clue what Brittany’s playing at, but I refuse to let her petty scheming go a single step further.

As soon as Petra and Eden are out of earshot, I round on my daughter. “Brittany, I don’t know what you *think* you saw —”

“I don’t *think* anything, Dad. I *know* what I saw.” She holds up her phone, displaying a photo of me kissing Eden in the parking garage.

My blood runs cold. “You were following us?”

“Obviously. And if you don’t want your *wife* to know you’re making out with her *daughter*, then you’re going to give me what I ask for.”

“And what’s that?”

“For starters, you’re going to book my trip to Cabo for spring break instead of making me wait ‘til graduation. And I want the new iPhone, and your Aston Martin. Actually, I want you to buy me *my own* car.”

My mind reels as she continues running through her wish list. Access to my Black Amex, her own apartment, a bigger and tackier eighteenth-birthday party than Allison’s.

I watch my daughter tick off her ridiculous demands on her manicured fingers. I’m not sure when it happened, but somewhere between the cradle and her first car, she changed into a person I don’t recognize. What happened to the child who used to share her ice cream with the dog? Who wanted nothing more than a hug and a bedtime story for her birthday? How did she become the kind of person who would try to blackmail her own father?

I’ve given my daughter everything she could ever want or need and *this* is how she repays me?

That’s when it hits me. Brittany is only selfish and spiteful *because* her mother and I have given her everything. And on the rare occasion when one of us said no, the other would say yes every time.

But not this time.

“And I want—”

“Enough.”

She scoffs. “What?”

“I’m not giving you anything, Brittany. In fact, I’m cutting you off. No more Jag, no more allowance, and no more trips on my dime. It’s time you learned to value the things you have. I’m only sorry I didn’t teach you this lesson sooner.”

Genuine fear widens her gaze. She folds her arms defiantly. “Fine, then I’ll just have to tell Petra—”

“No, you won’t, because I’m going to tell her myself.”

I leave her sputtering in the kitchen as I march back to the dining room.

Eden and Petra both look up at me as I enter.

“Is Brittany all right?” Petra asks.

Eden shoots me an anxious smile that I wish I could kiss away. But before I can do that, there’s something I need to say.

“Petra, I’m sorry, but our marriage is over.”

“What? Christian, I don’t understand. Why?”

“Because I’m in love with Eden.”

CHAPTER 12



EDEN

MOM'S FORK CLATTERS AGAINST HER PLATE.

Of all the things I thought Christian might say, never in a million years could I have guessed that he would choose *right now* to come clean about his feelings for me. Surely, he knows my mom can't take the stress. Right?

My first instinct is to laugh it off, play it up as a joke—until Brittany storms into the dining room, her face twisted in anger. She zeroes in on me.

“This is all your fault, you stupid fat skank—”

“Brittany,” Christian booms, the deep vibrato of his voice making me flinch. “I will not have you disrespecting *my* family in *my* house. Now pack your bags and go back to your mom's house.”

His tone is final, daring her to refute him.

She looks back and forth between me and Christian, helplessly. Then, in an almost comical showing of immaturity, she shrieks like a banshee, stomps her foot once, and marches out of the room.

Christian lets out a heavy breath. Seconds tick by in silence. *Until...*

Mom clasps her trembling hands.

“You're *in love* with my daughter?”

Christian reclaims his seat at the table and turns to my mother. “Petra, I'm sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. But

Eden and I have grown closer than I ever thought possible. She's a remarkable young woman. I want to be with her—" His eyes meet mine. "—if she'll have me, that is."

Mom takes a sharp breath.

"I don't understand. Eden, why didn't you say something?"

"I was afraid you'd be angry," I tell her.

"How could I be angry with you over this?"

"Not just with me. With Christian." I reach across the table, and he meets me halfway, squeezing my hand. "I was worried you'd make us leave, and then you wouldn't have health insurance or a place to live."

"Just so you know," he says, "Whatever happens, I'll always make sure you're both taken care of. You have my word."

"I don't care about all of that," my mom says.

"Mom, please, you can't—"

"Listen!" She looks at me, her face a picture of motherly concern. "Am I to understand that you're already seeing each other?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"Are you pregnant?"

My cheeks burn. "Not that I know of."

"Did he force you?"

"No," I insist, shaking my head. "Of course not, this is completely mutual, I promise. I love Christian." Out of the corner of my eye, I see Christian smile.

"I see." My mother's shoulders seem to shed some of their tension. Still, she rubs her head. "This is...a lot to take in. I think I need to lay down."

My body moves on instinct, out of my chair, to the other side of the table.

"Here, Mom, let me help you."

I grasp her elbow gently as she rises from her chair. Christian stays at the table as I help my mother to her bedroom. I'm sure he figures the two of us could use a chance to talk in private.

Neither of us says a word to each other on the way to her room. Like seasoned dancers, we perform our practiced routine of me helping her change into her nightdress. Finally, after arranging the pillows and blankets around her the way she likes them, I crack.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," I say. "And I'm sorry for sneaking around with your husband."

Her sardonic laugh makes me jump.

"Christian's only my husband on paper, Eden, you know that." She pulls the blanket up to her chin. "I've known for a while now that we weren't going to be able to keep up this charade. But I thought I would wait until after Christmas to break the news to him." She motions for me to sit on the bed and then takes my hand. "Is this man really what you want, Eden? Truthfully?"

"Yes, he is."

"Why? You're young, my dear. You have your whole life ahead of you, so much possibility."

"I know, and I plan on experiencing all of it. But I can't imagine doing it without him by my side." I squeeze her hand between both of mine. "I know Christian's probably not who you pictured me ending up with, but he's a good man. Dad wouldn't have asked him to take care of us if he wasn't a good man, right?"

Mom winces at the mention of my dad, and I almost feel bad for bringing him up. But I know in my heart that I'm right about this.

"I just want you to be happy," she says. "If being with Christian makes you happy, then I won't stop you. Not that I could. You're a grown woman, Eden. Who you love is up to you."

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss the back of her palm. I'm so buoyant and relieved that I feel like I could float.

“Thank you, Mom. I love you so much.”

She pats my knee. “I love you, too, sweetheart. Now go put that poor man out of his misery.”

I chuckle. “Okay, I will.”

CHAPTER 13



CHRISTIAN

EDEN HANDS PETRA A SMALL BOX WRAPPED IN GOLD FOIL.

“And this one is for you, Mom.”

Petra shakes the box beside her ear. “Now, what could this be?”

“Do you need help opening it?”

“*Spadaj.*” She waves her daughter’s hand away. “This is the fun part.”

I wrap my arm around Eden’s shoulders. Though it’s only Christmas Eve, we agreed that each of us would open one gift before bed tonight. Personally, I don’t mind waiting ‘til the morning, but I couldn’t say no to the excitement in my baby girl’s gaze.

As I watch Eden watching her mother, I can’t help thinking how perfect this moment feels. I was worried Petra would be furious when she learned the truth about my feelings for Eden, but she was surprisingly okay with it.

Apparently Petra had already been planning to suggest we end the marriage. It’s just as well. I know she’s still grieving Dan’s loss, but someday she might feel strong enough to open her heart to someone new.

Regardless of what the future holds, my lawyers say there’s a good chance we’ll be able to secure an annulment.

“Oh, Eden, this is beautiful.” Petra cradles the golden locket Eden picked out for her between her hands.

“Open it, Mom.” My baby girl’s practically bouncing on the rug with excitement.

Petra teases the locket open and gasps. “This is... Oh, this is...I don’t have the words.”

Tears spill down Petra’s cheeks as she gazes at the small photos of Dan and Eden inside the locket.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry,” Eden says.

“They’re happy tears, sweetheart, I promise.”

Eden rushes over to hug her mom. “I’m so glad you like it.”

“Like it? I *love* it. Thank you so much. This means the world to me.”

They spend a few minutes reminiscing about the past before Petra yawns.

“All of this excitement has winded me,” she says with a small smile. “I’ll leave you two to enjoy the evening. Merry Christmas, Christian.”

I smile. “Merry Christmas, Petra.”

While Eden helps Petra to her room, I begin picking up the stray wrapping paper. I’m just about finished when Eden returns.

“I think she really liked it,” Eden says, plopping down on the couch.

Dimming the lights, I leave only the tree and the gas fireplace on for ambience.

“I believe the word she used was ‘love’.” I sit down beside her and tease my arm around her shoulders.

“She did, didn’t she?” Eden practically melts against me. “I’m just glad she’s having a nice Christmas.”

“Seems like someone else is having a nice Christmas, too.” I’m acutely aware of the placement of her hand on my thigh.

“I’m having the *best* Christmas, Daddy,” she says, grinning. “What about you?”

“If you’re happy I’m happy. Although...”

She squints at me.

“What is it?”

I free my arm from around her shoulders and dig around in my pocket until I find the small box I’m looking for. I present it to Eden, who shoots me a confused look.

“But we agreed we’d only open *one* present each,” she says.

“I know. But this present is special, so it deserves to be the exception.”

“Fine.” She pouts, taking the box.

My heart hammers as she pries open the lid to reveal a platinum ring with five diamonds arranged to look like flowers.

Eden’s mouth drops open.

“Is this... No.” She shakes her head, smiling shyly. “Sorry, for a second I thought this was an engagement ring.”

“It is, Eden,” I say, my voice deadly serious.

Her throat shifts as she swallows. “Oh...”

“Baby girl, I could do the respectable thing and wait ‘til my divorce goes through to ask you to be my wife, but it would only be a formality. I know what I want, and that’s you, by my side, on my lap, and in my bed. Forever.”

Her silence has my pulse sprinting like a goddamn cheetah on steroids.

“Eden, you are the smartest, kindest, most beautiful, sexy, selfless woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing. I love you more than I ever thought possible. I want to spend every minute of the rest of my life making you the happiest woman—and baby girl—in the world.”

Tears collect on her eyelashes as she tries not to cry. I’m on the brink of losing my composure as well as my fucking mind when she finally nods her head.

“Yes. Yes, Daddy, I’ll marry you.”

I can’t stop the smile from spreading across my face. She climbs onto my lap and presses her face to the crook of my neck.

“I’m...so...happy,” she sobs.

“Hold on, baby.” I laugh, easing her back a little bit. “Let me put the ring on you.”

She wipes the tears from her cheeks and then holds out her left hand for me. I grasp it gently, pressing a kiss to her finger before sliding the ring on.

“It’s a perfect fit,” she whispers, looking at the ring in awe.

“Because you’re perfect.”

I cup her cheek and kiss her lips, intending to keep things chaste and sweet. But as soon as she opens her mouth, my tongue seeks hers out. Reaching around to grasp her backside, I pull her tight against my lap. She moans into my mouth.

“*Mmph*. Daddy, I want you.”

“I want you too, baby girl.”

She grinds her warm core against my growing erection. I know I should probably insist that we take this to the bedroom, but the thought of waiting another second to get my hands on her feels like too much.

“Hold on tight,” I rasp.

Grasping her ass firmly, I push up from the couch and maneuver us onto the rug. The twinkling Christmas lights bathe Eden’s face and hair in a warm glow.

“Since Daddy gave you an extra early Christmas gift, I think it’s only fair if you give me one, too. Right baby?”

She whimpers as I plant kisses all over her neck and jaw.

“Yes, Daddy,” she answers breathlessly. “I’ll give you whatever you want.”

I tease the waistband of her jeans.

“Whatever I want?”

She nods.

“In that case, I want your legs hooked over my shoulders and your pretty pussy grinding against my face. Think you can handle that, baby?”

Eden reaches for the button on her jeans. “I might need your help, Daddy.”

“Sure, baby.” I make quick work of unzipping her fly and pulling off her jeans and panties.

Once she’s bare from the waist down, I take a second to marvel at her body.

“Spread those creamy thighs for me, baby girl.” My cock throbs in my pants at the sight of her pussy glistening under the warm holiday lights. “Now *that* is what I want for Christmas.”

I dance my fingers along her inner thighs, making her gasp and whimper. Her petal-pink pussy is on full display, leaking and pulsing, making my mouth water with desire. I run my thumb over her wet slit.

“You’re always so soft, baby. So beautiful.” I lower myself to the rug and press a gentle kiss to her lower lips.

Her hips buck at the delicate contact. I chuckle.

“I’ve barely even started and you’re already so needy, aren’t you baby?”

She nods, her eyes glazing over with lust.

“That’s okay, baby girl, I’ll take care of you.” I drape her legs over my shoulders and lean in close, breathing in her intimate scent. Heady with arousal, I press teasing kisses to her inner thighs, alternating each leg until she can’t take it anymore.

“Daddy—” Her voice breaks off in a strangled moan. “Hurry, please!”

I breathe warm air over her center. “What do you need, baby?”

She tries to inch closer to my face. I lean back, rubbing light circles over her thighs, getting off on her desperation and loving how easily I can make her fall apart before I've even touched her pussy.

Finally, I touch my tongue to that tight little bud between her thighs. She moans. After a few teasing licks, I dive in fully, moving my head up and down, then side to side. She grinds her pussy into my face.

"Fuck, Daddy. Your tongue feels so fucking good."

I close my lips around her clit and suck. She holds her breath and rolls her hips, then gasps loudly. Releasing her clit, I circle my tongue around her sweet little bud. My lips and chin are soaked in her juices, but that's nothing compared to the rug beneath her ass.

"Are you close, baby?"

"Y-yes, Daddy. I'm a-almost there."

"If you come for me, like a good little girl, I'll give you another present. It's big and hard and just for you."

She moans at my words. *"Oh, God, yes!"*

I drag my tongue through her folds and slip inside her entrance. She rocks into me, fucking herself on my tongue, as I taste her velvety walls and trace small circles over her clit with my thumb. Her hips jerk. She so close, I can feel her pussy twitching around my tongue.

"Yes, Daddy, fuck yes!"

Eden shakes and shudders as her orgasm hits hard, grasping my hair with both hands and pressing my face to her pussy. I don't stop licking and rubbing her clit until she's practically fighting to get me off.

"It's too much, Daddy. Oh, God..."

Finally, I back off, wiping her arousal from my beard with the sleeve of my dress shirt.

"Sorry, baby. Daddy's not done with you yet."

I untuck my shirt and pull it off over my head. Eden's gaze roams lazily down my bare chest, falling to the thickness in my pants. She bites her lip as I undo my buckle.

"Spread those pussy lips for me, little girl. Show Daddy his present."

She reaches down and holds her pussy lips apart so I can see her pink insides. A spike of arousal shoots through me and I practically rip my pants and boxers off.

I wrap my hand around my shaft and pump.

"Good girl. Now, let Daddy see those gorgeous tits."

My cock throbs in my fist as she pulls up her sweater and shoves her bra cups below her breasts. I lean down to lavish her breasts with gentle bites and hard kisses. When my cock ruts against her pussy, we both groan.

Eden grasps my face with both hands. "Please, Daddy. I need your cock."

I kneel back on my feet so that my cock is jutting straight out between her legs.

"You need this cock, baby?" I guide her left hand to my dick. "Just look how pretty that ring looks when your hand's wrapped around my cock."

She strokes my dick, back and forth, marveling at her engagement ring all the while.

"It does look pretty, Daddy."

"Not as pretty as you." I reach down to rub her clit. She bites her lip. "Now line Daddy's cock up so he can fuck you."

She guides my dick to her entrance and begins trying to slide it inside.

"So impatient," I tease. "That's all right. Daddy's impatient, too."

Our moans fill the air as I thrust inside her, relishing the way her walls clench around me. About halfway in, I withdraw almost to the tip, and then surge forward.

“Fuck, baby, you feel amazing.”

She throws her head back. With the long column of her throat exposed and vulnerable, I can't stop myself from leaning down and sucking on her delicate skin.

“You fill me up so good, Daddy.”

“And you fit me so perfectly, baby. It's like you were made for me. The perfect little pussy made just for my cock.” I thrust harder, punctuating each word with every hard inch of me.

Her moans shatter into sobs as she loses the ability to speak. I keep her mouth busy with kisses, sucking on her tongue at the same rate that I'm fucking her pussy.

I feel her muscles tighten, encouraging me to thrust harder, faster, deeper.

“I feel how close you are, baby. I want you to come on my cock. Can you do that for me?”

She nods frantically.

I reach between us and press against her clit, knowing exactly what she needs to reach her climax. With a few more hard thrusts, my balls tighten, and fireworks explode behind my eyelids. Not a split second later, Eden seizes around me so tight I swear she's trying to strangle my cock.

We collapse in a heap of sweat and limbs and heavy panting. I'm not sure how much time passes before I can lift my head again. But when I do, I find Eden's satisfied gaze waiting for me.

“Wow,” she breathes. “That was intense.”

“Too much?” I ask.

She shakes her head.

“Just right.”

I kiss her, languidly licking into her mouth as I rock my hips and make gentle half-pushes into her. She mewls around my tongue as her arms fall to the rug.

With great reluctance, I rise onto my knees and gaze down at her. The glow from the Christmas lights makes gems of her eyes. She takes my breath away. I lay down beside her, pulling her against me, loving the way her soft body molds to mine. The diamonds on her ring catch the light as she combs her fingers through my chest hair.

I grasp her hand and kiss her palm.

“Did you get everything you wanted for Christmas, baby girl?”

Eden smiles at the ring on her finger.

“Yes, Daddy. Everything, and so much more.”

EPILOGUE



EDEN

Four years later...

“I GOT IT, BABY,” CHRISTIAN SAYS AS HE TAKES THE SHOPPING cart from me. I sigh in half-hearted exasperation and let him take it.

Although I haven't stopped reminding him that I'm only *pregnant*, not incapacitated, he insists on doing anything and everything he can for me, even going so far as to carry me into bed. He's cut me out of any cooking or cleaning duties around the house, demanding that my only job for the next two months is to rest and relax.

The few times he's caught me trying to cook dinner or fold laundry have all ended with me in bed and his face in between my legs. By the time he's done with me, I'm usually too tired to finish what I was doing in the first place.

My husband is diabolical.

I love him so much.

Honestly, I don't mind taking it easy for a while, at least until I'm ready to start med school. I completed my bachelor's degree last spring while battling morning sickness. Getting to focus on my husband and our baby without worrying about homework has been a nice change of pace.

“How's this?” Christian holds out a tiny newborn onesie with an elf on the front.

I laugh and rub a hand over my swollen stomach. “He's not going to be born until February so an elf onesie might be a

little out of season.”

Christian pursues his lips. “Right, right,” he murmurs, thumbing through some other options. “We wouldn’t want our infant to be unfashionable. What about this one?”

“Mom already got us that one.”

My mom moved out of the apartment and into a swanky assisted living facility a couple of years ago. She’s doing well, all things considered, and I feel better knowing she has access to the best care around the clock. We get together twice a week and take the occasional trip to the beach or quiet village. We’ve been to Poland twice now.

When I told her I was pregnant, she was so excited, she practically leapt out of bed to rub my belly. I was so afraid she’d break a hip that I called her nurse in to come help me settle her down.

“We still need a car-seat, right?” I ask Christian, doing a mental checklist of everything we have and everything we need.

“Actually, Brittany told me she’s getting that for your baby shower.”

“I thought she couldn’t make it.”

“She can’t, but she said she’d drop it off beforehand.”

I wouldn’t say that Brittany and her father are close, but they talk on the phone at least once a week now. She’s done a lot of maturing over the last few years, and even apologized for the way she treated me when we met. We’re slowly warming up to each other, and while I wouldn’t call us friends, I’ve come to enjoy her company in small doses. I hope one day that we *can* be friends, because I want Christian to have both of his children in his life.

“What about maternity clothes?” he asks. “Do you need any more?”

We’ve drifted from the baby section to the maternity section of the store.

“I don’t think so. You and my mom have already bought me so much stuff, I doubt there’s room in the closet.”

“Oh, really?” The lilt in his voice has me turning around to look at him.

In his hand, he dangles a red, lacy teddy lingerie piece.

“Not even enough room for this?” His gaze travels down my body, making me shiver.

My face warms.

“I could probably find room for that.”

He moves closer to tell me, “You should probably try it on first, though. Just to make sure you like it.”

He gestures in the direction of the dressing rooms.

Biting my lip, I nod and follow him to the fitting rooms. He slips the saleswoman a folded hundred-dollar bill and follows me inside.

As soon as the door closes, Christian is on me, claiming my mouth in a hot kiss and tugging my shirt up over my belly. I’m not especially flexible at the moment, so I let him undress me. Stripped down to my underwear, I gasp as he slides his hand down the front of my panties.

“*Daddy*,” I chastise quietly. “Here?”

My stomach flutters as he presses his erection against me.

“I’m sorry, baby. You know how I get around Christmastime. It makes me hungrier for you than usual.” He kisses my neck in apology but continues teasing his finger up and down my slit.

“How about I get that lingerie as a Christmas gift for you?” I tease, rolling my hips toward his hand, feeling myself get wet on his fingers.

He nips at my shoulder. “I’ll buy you the whole damn *wall* of lingerie, baby girl. That would be a present for both of us.”

I laugh, aware that he’s only half kidding. Something about this time of year brings out the wild in us. We can’t seem to

keep our hands off each other. I think it's because it reminds us of our first Christmas together.

I lay my head on his chest and listen to the steady, strong beat of his heart.

“Merry Christmas, Daddy.”

He kisses the top of my head as his fingers continue to work their magic between my legs. “Merry Christmas, baby girl.”

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ABOUT MARGOT SCOTT



USA Today Bestselling Author Margot Scott likes short, sexy reads, rainbow sprinkles on vanilla ice cream, and rainy days spent in bed with her furbabies. When she's not writing forbidden love stories about bearded older men, you can find her browsing Pinterest for pictures of pink things.

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ABOUT NATALIE KNIGHT

Natalie started her journey to becoming an author when she got tired of failing. It was the one thing nobody could tell her she was doing wrong. Between trying to fit into a career, she had a hard time excelling in and the voices in her head, she made a choice and choose the stories and characters that never seemed to shut up. Her taste is peculiar, dancing on the line of taboo with thirty-year-plus age gaps and step-siblings to giving her villains happily ever afters. She believes rules are made to be broken, stalkers are the best lovers (in fiction, anyway), and if it isn't dangerous and delectable, it's not worth her time.

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